

Great Expectations: Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John the Baptist

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[0 : 00] Father in heaven, we thank you for your Holy Spirit who leads us into your truth, who opens your word to us. Help us to understand your word and transform our lives, turn our lives upside down by your wondrous grace as we hear from your word this morning.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Well, I want to join James' welcome, and I sound like I'm a little bit loud, so just a tiny bit down, see ya, and that way I won't blast you out with the sermon.

But it's wonderful to have you all gathered here, and I know that there's a number of people who are visiting with us, and I especially want to warmly welcome you as well. Well, just to bring you up to speed, today it's an odd kind of day in the church here because Advent, the last Sunday of Advent is this morning, and then we go into Christmas, Christmas Eve tonight.

And so we're wishing each other a happy Christmas and Advent all at the same time. We've got all our services combined together, our three services at this service. And I want to let you know that we are just finishing up a short sermon series in Advent looking at people in the Bible who encounter Jesus, the baby Jesus, hear about his birth and how it affected their lives.

And the thing in common with all of them, there's Joseph, there's the wise men, scribes, and Herod, there's Mary, the mother of Jesus. All of them had their lives turned upside down.

[1 : 33] By the newborn Jesus. And it's no different for the three people that Jordy was reading about in Luke as well. And this is Zechariah, Elizabeth, and their newborn son, John.

And that's what we're going to focus on this morning. These three people and what their lives were like, how they were different because of Jesus. Now, for those of you who are Christians with us this morning, I don't know if you've ever thought about how unique your life is because of the Lord Jesus Christ in it.

If you think about that, it inevitably leads you to think about what life would be like without knowing Jesus Christ. You would have a very different hope.

You would have a very different purpose in your life. You would have a very different relationship with God. And a very different idea about who he is.

And Paul, in Ephesians 2, considers that difference as well. He says, think about the difference between not knowing Jesus and knowing him. He says, remember that at one time you were separated from Jesus Christ.

[2 : 49] You were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and you were strangers to the covenant of promise. Having no hope and without God. It's a sobering thought.

But then he goes on to give this incredible contrast. He says, but now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off, you have been brought near by the blood of Jesus Christ.

This is what happens with Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John. Their lives are brought close to God by Jesus. Not by his blood yet. He hasn't died on a cross yet.

But their lives are turned upside down, just as Joseph, Mary, and the wise men were, by this Jesus who would be coming soon.

And each of you who have put your faith in Jesus Christ, you have been brought near to God by this tremendous gift of Jesus' blood on the cross.

[3 : 47] You have come into the very life of God. He is your peace and he gives you access to God, the Father, who has loved us from the beginning of time. That grace changes everything, including the way that we can live and love God in return.

And to understand that better, we can look at God's grace in Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John. Turn in your Bibles right now to Luke 1 on page 856.

And I want to give you a little bit of background to that reading that Geordie read. Because Luke says at the beginning of this chapter that Zechariah and Elizabeth were both very faithful, devout, and godly people.

They were deeply committed to God and to living for him. Elizabeth, it says, was the daughter of a priest. And Zechariah was a priest as well.

And they lived in this very small village in the hill country of Judah, south of Jerusalem, sort of in the backwater of Israel. And Elizabeth was unable to.

[4 : 57] She was medically unable to have children. And she was now well beyond childbearing age. This was a difficult thing because their culture believed that the blessing of having children was a sign that you were a righteous person.

That you were favored by God. And he was giving grace that way. And so this was devastating for them. They must have wondered, what are we doing wrong? Why do we deserve this happening to us?

Why doesn't God favor us? And in the midst of all this, this life, they lived life and they were well respected in their town. And Zechariah took the trip to Jerusalem twice a year to perform his duties in the temple with his group of priests.

Now he was not an important figure. In fact, I don't know if you know this, there were 24 groups of priests in Israel and each group had 750 priests.

So do your math. He was one of 18,000 priests. So at St. John's, we're not quite there yet. They're all from a small village. And he himself is from this small village.

[6 : 10] Well, at the beginning of chapter 1, he is chosen by lot, by chance, to be the one to go in alone to the altar of incense, which is right in the very middle of this glorious temple.

And he was chosen to be the one to burn incense and to pray. And he would be the only one there. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. In fact, many priests never got that opportunity at all.

While he is there on his own, there is an angel that appears next to the altar, on the right side of the altar. And he said, your prayers are answered.

And the angel went on to say, Elizabeth is going to have a son. And he will announce the Savior's immediate coming. Now, Zechariah, what was he praying for?

He was not praying for a child. He had given up on that. He knew it was physically impossible. What he was praying for is for a Savior to come to Israel.

[7 : 16] He knew that Israel desperately needed God to deliver them. And as you know, Zechariah was not thinking of a child at all because he didn't believe the angel.

He said, how can I since I am old and my wife is advanced in years? And the angel replied, because he didn't believe my words, you are going to be silent.

And what that means is that in this context is he's going to be deaf and he is going to be unable to speak until John is born. So that's the background. And we fast forward to this very happy day of this passage.

Because in it, if you turn to verse 57, this baby, this miracle baby is born. And everybody in the village celebrates this amazing event.

You have the sense that the village loves Elizabeth and Zechariah. They are very happy for them. They're going to have lots of babysitters to help them in their old age with this newborn child. And on the day of his naming, eight days later, everyone expects him to be named Zechariah.

[8 : 24] Of course you would. That's the dad. You're a priest. You've got to do it. And in fact, the Bible says here that they were actually on the point of naming him themselves. But on that day, Elizabeth says, no, we're naming him John, despite public opinion.

There's a big outcry. Everybody has an opinion. You have no relatives by that name. How could you do that? Sometimes you have difficulty naming your child. I know I did.

If I had had a girl for our youngest, we would have been in very big trouble because Catherine and I did not agree on any names for girls. God gave us mercy and gave us a boy.

We both agreed. So if you think you might have trouble, they had terrible trouble at that point. And so the group of townspeople go to Zechariah.

Come on, Zechariah. Your wife is saying crazy things here. What are you actually going to name him? And they have to do it in sign language, the Bible says here. And he motions for a tablet to be brought to him.

[9 : 31] And at that time, by the way, a tablet was a board with wax on it. And you could just scratch in it and then wipe it clear again. It was the first iPad. So he took that ancient iPad and he wrote these words.

Very, very memorable. His name is John. Now, in saying that, he was doing exactly what the angel said. But more than that, names were incredibly important in that culture.

That name means God is gracious. God has shown favor. There's a double meaning because, yes, God has shown favor to this elderly couple in giving them this child.

But more than that, John's whole message will be that God is gracious. Because he will be pointing in his whole life to Jesus, who is God's grace.

It is God's incredible goodness to humanity. That's what his life will be about. And the moment that Zechariah wrote this, his mouth could speak and he could hear perfectly.

[10 : 40] And immediately, we see here, he praises God. Now, if you were Zechariah, what's the first thing you would have said if you had not been speaking for nine months?

Do you know what you, would you have said, do you know what I went through for these nine months? Let me tell you. This is what happened. Well, instead, Zechariah blesses God.

There is a wonderful service, and we don't do it much at the early service, but every other week we do it here at the nine and the 11. We do a morning prayer service, and there's a part of that service where the leader says, open thou our mouth, and, O Lord, open thou my lips, and we all respond by saying, my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

Well, this is exactly what Zechariah does. He praises God when God opens his mouth. And Jesus says, a few chapters on, in his ministry, he says, you know, out of the abundance of your heart, the mouth speaks.

Zechariah had an abundant heart here. He had had lots of time to mull over in silence the grace of God and the miracle of this baby growing inside Elizabeth.

[11 : 58] And that grace filled his heart. I was struck by a Christmas card that Christian friends in their 90s wrote to us, and they said in there that our motto for our remaining years is that we try to live with an attitude of gratitude to God.

Well, that comes from an abundant heart. It comes out of a strong understanding of the grace of God to write something like that about your life. And I think that Christmas is a very good time for us all to really ponder God's grace in your life.

Even if it has been a very difficult year, as it was for Zechariah, it is good to consider what God and his grace is doing in you and through you.

And we need help with this. The Holy Spirit helps you to do this. This is what happens in Luke 1. The Holy Spirit is very active in this chapter. In fact, he fills every member of Zechariah's family for the particular task of speaking about God and his great works.

So, Zechariah is filled here down in verse 67 there. Holy Spirit fills him, and he will prophesy in an incredible song, which we're going to look at in a moment.

[13 : 20] And then back in verse 15, John is filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. And in verse 41, even though John doesn't yet speak because he's inside of Elizabeth, he kicks his mom when he comes close to Jesus, saying, there he is.

There is Jesus. And then he speaks about Jesus to thousands and thousands as he grows older. Him speaking because of the Holy Spirit.

And then in the same verse 41, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, and what does she do? She proclaims that this little baby Jesus, who is unborn, is her Lord, the Lord.

And this is important for us because if you follow Jesus, you have been filled with his Holy Spirit. And he helps you to speak of God's grace in your life, of the hope that is in you, of the fact that Jesus is Lord.

And you can speak that privately in your prayers, or with relatives, as Elizabeth did with Mary, or with neighbors and colleagues, as Zechariah did, or with wider groups of people, as John ended up doing.

[14 : 36] It's a very good prayer to ask the Holy Spirit to open your mouth so your mouth can declare, set forth God's praise.

He will help you. He will give you creative ways to speak of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Well, Zechariah does this with great joy.

And he must have been filled with joy because he's holding his baby John in his arms. But it's not the first thing he prays God for in this song from verses 67 and following.

Because that song is a prophecy. And you have to understand how important this is, how significant it is, because he speaks of God's great acts in this prophecy.

And this is the first time that God speaks in this way for 400 years. There has been silence since the last book of the Old Testament, since Malachi. And here, God speaks through a prophet, Zechariah.

[15 : 38] And that's why it's important for us to look at these words here. In verses 68 and 69, Zechariah praises God for two great gifts, acts of grace that affect us powerfully today at this time of Christmas.

First of all, he has visited and redeemed his people, verse 68. Now, whenever the Old Testament talks about God visiting his people, it's not coming by for a few minutes to say hello.

When the Old Testament speaks of God visiting his people, it is about God acting in a powerful way at a time when his people are in great need.

So, for instance, when the people of God were suffering through their slavery in Egypt, God visited them. And he redeemed them. He freed them out of Egypt through the Red Sea.

So, that word redeem means that a prisoner or a slave is freed to a redeemer who pays a price for that release.

[16 : 47] And so, Zechariah, Zechariah's son John, is going to prepare the people for God to act in the most powerful way to redeem them, to release them.

And secondly, in verse 69, he gives God thanks because God has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.

Now, unfortunately, Terry, a horn is not musical here. The horn is the horn of an animal, an oxen or a ram. And it was a symbol of great power and great authority.

So, it says that one with immense power and immense authority from the royal line of David, he is bringing salvation. And he is Jesus who John will point to and he's going to serve throughout all his life.

All of this is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophets. That's what Zechariah sings about. And the promises that God gave. God's plan through all of time was to free his people and to deliver them.

[17 : 53] And Zechariah says, at last, at last, God has sent his long-expected Savior. Now, there's a question that comes up here.

Why does God save and free people around the world? Why does he free people from all enemies and all that enslaves them? Why does he do it? Well, look at verses 74 and 75.

Here's the reason. It says, that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

You see, there's two parts to God's freeing us. One is that we are released from the things that imprison us. And what are those enemies that bring fear that we need deliverance from?

Is it released from terrorism or violence or oppressive governments or poverty or hunger? Those are difficult things. But no, Zechariah says in verse 77, there's a far more crucial needs even than those things.

[18 : 58] And that is our spiritual need. That we all need a release from sin which brings freedom from having no hope and from being without God in this world.

That is our deepest need. That is the greatest enemy that we need release from. And then the second part of that is that we are freed to someone.

We are released to serve God boldly in the way that he has made us to live. And we do this in the power of the Holy Spirit. We do this because of the reality of the living Lord Jesus in our lives.

We obey him and we worship him and we sacrifice for his sake. Not so that we might one day obtain freedom and salvation but because Jesus has done this already.

He has freed you to serve him without any fear or guilt and with great joy at being enveloped by the tender mercy of God which he sings about here.

[20 : 05] That is what we are freed to. We are freed from spiritual slavery. We are freed to this grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to serve him without fear and with great joy.

And that's why Zechariah is so exuberant and joyful in this song. It's not just because he's holding this miracle baby in his arms. It's because that baby is a sign of a Savior who is coming.

Of one who meets the very deepest need of humanity. The living God will be with us. Now Zechariah ends his song by actually talking to his little baby finally in verse 77.

And he says this. He says sorry it's in verse 76. He says you child you child will be called the prophet of the most high for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.

and this is exactly what John the Baptist identity would be all about. He would serve Jesus he would point to him in everything that he said and he did and he would prepare people to receive Jesus.

[21 : 23] Further on in Luke 7 Jesus said that John was the greatest of all the prophets. In fact he says he's the greatest person that ever lived. Very high praise. Yet Jesus said the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than John.

What does he mean by this? Well this brings us to today and I want to close the sermon with this because Jesus is saying that as great as John was he had not yet seen what Jesus would do through his work on the cross in forgiving the sins of humanity and then rising again on the third day.

he would give the Holy Spirit to all people. He would redeem people and forgive their sins and they would serve Jesus as their Lord and King in the power of the Holy Spirit here on earth and that is true greatness.

And this is the opportunity that you and I have now. John did not see that before he died. He was pointing to Jesus and his coming kingdom and preparing people for him.

and now we have Jesus. He has come close. He is our Emmanuel. And as we go by as we leave this passage Zechariah, Elizabeth and John are incredible examples to us because they were deeply aware of God's grace in their lives and we have more grace.

[22 : 58] John couldn't escape that by the way. His name meant the Lord is gracious. And their lives were a shining spotlight on Jesus who is God's grace to us as they spoke and as they lived.

That is what they are remembered for above all things that they pointed to Jesus. And this passage invites you today to know and to ponder God's grace in your own life today.

to really think about who Jesus is for you. But it also calls you to act. To know that even though you have many roles, your essential identity is to be a person who points others to Jesus and who is a spotlight shining on him through your life, through your own unique ways of pointing to Christ.

God has visited you. He has redeemed you in Jesus so that you might serve him without fear in holiness, in righteousness before him all your days.

May God the Holy Spirit, the same Holy Spirit that filled Zechariah, John, and Elizabeth, may he strengthen you to do just that. Amen.