

A CHARACTER STUDY OF
JOHN THE BAPTIST

Lesson 1

THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Luke 1:5-25

H. David Nichols

Gethsemane Baptist Church

Adult Sunday school Class

THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.

Luke 1:13

In the Old Testament God spoke to his people through His spirit filled prophets. The ministry of the Old Testament prophets ended at about 400 B.C. with the words of the prophet Malachi. The final verses of Malachi promise that God would one day send another prophet to prepare His people for the coming of the Messiah of God. *“Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts.”* (Malachi 3:1) Jesus told us that this prophecy was fulfilled in the birth of John the Baptist. (Luke 7:27) *“Malachi 3:1 therefore expressly prophesies that before Christ the Lord appears to His people He will send a messenger ahead to prepare the way before Him. ... Jesus Himself said of John that he was the prophet Elijah who was to come.”* (Geldenhuis. P. 65) Even the messenger Gabriel said of this man, before his birth that, *“He shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”* (Luke 1:17)

This man, John, was a very special servant who came for the express purpose of calling God's people to righteousness before the Lord Jesus came on the scene. Gabriel said of him also, that *"he shall be great"* (Vs. 15) His life was "great" or special in many ways. He is one of the few New Testament personalities that we read about where his entire life's story is told. Luke chapter one tells us the story of his birth. In the gospels we read several instances of his exploits and then we are told the circumstances of his death. He is one of the very few New Testament people whose lives are foretold in the Old Testament. We have mentioned the passages in Malachi that tell of his life. In Isaiah we also read of one who will come, *"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."* (Isa. 40:5) His birth was specially announced to his parents to let them know just how "great" his life would be.

John was born at a unique time in the history of Israel. There had been no prophetic word from God since Malachi, over 400 years before. It was a time of moral and spiritual decline. Yet in this time God determined to allow His Son, The Lord Jesus to enter into history. *"But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons."* (Gal. 4:4-5) John was to announce the arrival of the Messiah.

Luke chapter one verses 5 through 25 tell of the announcement and circumstances of John's birth. His parents were unique in their godliness and faith. "The history of John the Baptist and his parents forms the link between the revelation of God in the Old Testament period and in the New Testament period. ... Zacharias was a priest who belonged to the order of the course of Abijah. He was married to Elisabeth who was also of priestly descent. To be a priest and to be married to a priest's daughter was considered to be a double and special distinction." (Geldenhuys. P.60) Scripture says of them *"And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless."* (Lk 1:6) The name Zacharias means "The Lord remembers". He remembers His promises. The Name Elisabeth means "My God is the absolute faithful one." It was to this man, Zacharias, as he ministered in the Temple, Gabriel came with the news of the birth of his son who was to be the Voice that would prepare the people of God for the promised Messiah of God. The messenger from God, Gabriel, whose name means "the man of God" announced to Zacharias *"that thy prayer is heard."* (Luke 1:13) There has been much speculation as to what prayer the angel is referring. It may be the prayer that he and his barren wife, Elisabeth, had often prayed for; a child of their own. It may be the prayer that all the faithful of Israel prayed; for the Messiah to come. One more idea may be suggested by the present tense of the angel's statement. In his

office as priest no doubt, Zacharias prayed for the blessings of God upon Israel. The obvious truth is that with the coming of John and Jesus all three prayers were answered. God hears and answers prayer and always keeps His promises. Gabriel also reveals to Zacharias several other things that would be true of this baby that was to be born. He shall be great in God's eyes. John was a great man as he called the people of God back to lives of righteousness. Jesus said of him, *"For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist"* (Luke 7:28). He would be dedicated to God from his birth as a Nazarite and he would be *"filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb."* (Vs. 15) He, in his life, would turn the people back to God and *"to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."* (Vs. 17)

Zacharias was very skeptical of this announcement. He argued that he and Elisabeth were past the age of child bearing. His skepticism was answered by Gabriel with a statement of just who he was. *"I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings."* (Vs. 19) As a sign for John, to the surety of these words and as a response to his cynicism Zacharias, was struck deaf and mute. (cp. Vs. 62) He would not be able to speak until the child was born. "This chastisement, however, serves to cleanse him from his unbelief. Although he doubted the words of Gabriel, they will nevertheless come

true in due time because God will bring them to pass.” (Geldenhuis. P. 68)

Zacharias emerged from the Temple unable to speak and apparently, according to verse 62 he was deaf as well. To the watching people it was evident that something had happened. He returned home with his wife, Elizabeth, and in the natural course of things Elizabeth finds herself with child. She spends the first five months in seclusion contemplating just what God was doing with her. Her response was an example of faith and confidence in God. *“Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.”* (Vs. 25)

Luke moves then from the story of John’s birth to the story of Mary and Joseph and the conception of the Lord Jesus. He rejoins the story of John in verse 57. Upon his birth the major point of conversation centered around the naming of the new baby. The family and neighbors assumed he would be called Zacharias, after his father. Imagine the surprise when Elisabeth stops them and says, that his name would be called John. The family objected because there was no precedence in the history of the family for this name. They took the matter for Zacharias to decide. He simply states as a matter of fact that, *“His name is John.”* The baby had been named by God, Himself. “It is natural, therefore, that the New Dispensation was on the point of commencing, the leading characters had to

be called by special significant names. Thus, we have Zacharias – God remembers His covenant; Elisabeth – God is the absolutely faithful one; John – God is merciful, or the gift of God; and finally, Jesus – God saves, or the divine savior.” (Geldenhuys. P. 90-91)

The story of John’s nativity is concluded with, *“And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel.”* (Vs. 80) He was the prepared instrument placed in the proper spot to accomplish the will of the Father. He would, *“give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”* (Vs. 77-79)

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