

The Greatest Life Ever Lived

A Study in the Incarnate Life of Jesus Christ and An Exposition of the Four Gospels

LESSON IX: THE ANNUNCIATION OF JOHN THE BAPTIST'S BIRTH

Matthew	Mark	Luke 1:5-25	John	related passages
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As an overview of the entire section, A. B. Bruce in *The Expositor's Greek Testament* states the rest of this chapter is "written in Greek which is Hebraistic in phrase and structure, and Jewish in its tone of piety. The evangelist here seems to have at command an Aramaic, Jewish-Christian source, which he, as a faithful collector of evangelic memorabilia, allows to speak for itself, with here and there an editorial touch." Godet in his commentary on *Luke* says "The first words of the narrative bring us back from the midst of Greece, whither we were transported by the prologue, into a completely Jewish world. The very style changes its character. From the fifth verse it is so saturated with Aramaisms that the contrast with the four preceding verses resulting from it obliges us to admit... that he is dealing with ancient documents, the Aramaic coloring of which he endeavors to preserve as faithfully as possible."

v5 in the days of Herod : Herod the Great or Herod the First. The date of his birth apparently 74 BC, and the dates of his rule over the Jews typically given as 37-4 BC. Mentioned here and Mt 2:1-22 but nowhere else in the NT. Not to be confused with his son Herod the Tetrarch (Mt 14:1).

a certain priest named Zacharias : common name, used of about thirty different people in the scriptures. The name means "Jehovah has remembered."

of the course of Abia : David organized and divided the priests into twenty-four divisions (1 Chron 24:1-19) which was reaffirmed by his son Solomon (2 Chron 8:14). Zacharias belonged to the eighth division of Abijah (1 Chron 24:10). Of these twenty-four divisions, only four returned from the Babylonian captivity (Ezra 2:36-39). These four were redivided into twenty-four and given the original names. Twice a year each division was on temple duty for a period of one week. Godet states this would have probably been either the third week in April or the first week of October. Edersheim agrees it would have been the first week in October.

and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth : although it was permissible for the priest to marry a virgin from any tribe (Lev 21:14), it was commendable and counted as an added blessing to marry one in the priest's line. Practically speaking, compatibility is essential to happiness in marriage. Elisabeth's name means "God (or my God) is an oath", meaning "the Absolutely Reliable One."

v6 they were both righteous before God : not only before men but before God who searches the hearts. Hendriksen makes this observation: Scripture speaks of our righteousness in two manners: one which is a *righteousness by imputation* and another which is a *righteousness by impartation*; i.e. we can only be truly righteous and blameless before God by the atoning death of Christ, the blood shed on Calvary, and by the Lord *imputing* or reckoning the righteousness of Jesus to our account (Rom 3:21-24; Eph 1:7; Heb 9:22; 1 Pet 2:24; Rev 7:14; et. al.). Another sense in which men are righteous however is by our lives, the work of sanctification. "Although these two should be distinguished, they should never be separated. Though it is true that good works have never saved anybody, it is also true that the person who is conscious of having been saved by grace through faith will put forth every effort to do good works. Eph 2:8,9 must never be separated from 2:10; nor Titus 2:11 from 2:14." [Hendriksen, *Luke*]

walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless : "walking" is a familiar term used to describe a habitual tenor of life

all the commandments / ordinances: the commandments denoting the moral aspects of the law, the ordinances being the outward ceremonial teachings

blameless : not perfect but without reproach. Note we must balance the apostasy of Israel with the faithful remnant.

v7 and they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years : Wuest: "and they did not have a child because Elizabeth was sterile, and both were advanced in age." As Abraham / Sarah prior to Isaac, Elkanah / Hannah prior to Samuel, Manoah / his wife prior to Samson, so was Zacharias and Elisabeth prior to John's birth. Fertility was stated as a blessing of obedience (Dt 7:14; Ps 113:9) but some interpreted that as an infallible sign of God's disfavor. This is a lesson for us all: *it is not for us to view other's difficulties as judgement from the Lord, it is for us to respond Christ-like to those with problems. It is the Lord's business as to why the difficulties come.*

they were both well stricken in years, which Edersheim states the Talmud Tractate Pirqey Abhoth "Sayings of the Fathers" gives the 'commencement of agedness' as sixty years of age. While there was a "retirement age" for the Levites, the priests could serve as long as nothing hindered their service.

practical from JFB: prior to the Lord giving a special blessing to His people, He usually first creates a longing for the blessing, and

yet withholds it from them till all hope of it is dying within them. This makes the blessing more surprising and more welcome, an object of deeper interest and delight.

v8,9 and it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, according to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord : the daily duties assigned to each priest during his week of service was decided by lot: three were to offer incense, to remove the ashes of the former service (in the morning), to bring in and place on the golden altar the pan filled with hot burning coals taken from the altar of burnt offering, and to sprinkle the incense on the hot coals. While the smoke ascended, that priest would make intercession for his people. This was the most distinguished part of the service, one that occurs but once a lifetime and never for some priests, and the lot had fell on Zacharias. "Only once in a lifetime might any one enjoy that privilege [according to the Talmud Tractate Tamid on the daily Service and Sacrifice in the Temple]. Henceforth he was called 'rich,' and must leave to his brethren the hope of the distinction which had been granted him." [Edersheim, *Life of Messiah*]

v10 and the whole multitude of the people were praying without : the whole multitude of worshippers were without in the courtyard where the altar of burnt offering was, the altar being visible to all. "Prayer is for the many, by the many."

at the time of incense : which was offered twice a day with the morning (9 AM) and evening (3 PM) sacrifice. Edersheim suggests this was the time of the Morning Sacrifice which was the principal service of the day, although the incense was offered in the evening as well. Two things are pictured here:

- **the acceptableness of the sacrifice** which was still burning on the altar. It was from this offering that the coals were taken and placed on the golden altar, with the incense being put on the coals (Lev 16:12,13)
- **the acceptableness of themselves and all their services**, as living sacrifices presented daily to the Lord (Ps 141:2). Note the incense offering was only acceptable due to the expiatory virtue of the burnt offering, clearly a picture of the Lamb of God which took away our sins prior to any service being acceptable unto God (cp our prayers pictured in Rev 8:3,4; and Isa 6:6,7 in which the symbolic touching the prophet's lips with the live coal { from the altar } was interpreted as taking away one's sins in order that he was clean to speak unto God).

The scene is described as follows: "For the first, and for the last time in life the lot had marked him for incensing, and every thought must have centered on what was before him. Even outwardly, all attention would be requisite for the proper performance of his office. First, he had to choose two of his special friends or relatives, to assist in his sacred service. Their duties were comparatively simple. One reverently removed what had been left on the altar from the previous evening's service; then, worshipping, retired backwards. The second assistant now advanced, and, having spread to the utmost verge of the golden altar the live coals taken from that of burnt-offering, worshipped and retired. Meanwhile the sound of the 'organ' (the Magrephah), heard to the most distant parts of the Temple, and, according to tradition, far beyond its precincts, had summoned priests, Levites, and people to prepare for whatever service or duty was before them. For, this was the innermost part of the worship of the day. But the celebrant Priest, bearing the golden censer, stood alone within the Holy Place, lit by the sheen of the seven-branched candlestick. Before him - somewhat farther away, towards the heavy Veil that hung before the Holy of Holies, was the golden altar of incense, on which the red coals glowed. To his right (the left of the altar - that is, on the north side) was the table of shewbread; to his left, on the right or south side of the altar, was the golden candlestick. And still he waited, as instructed to do, till a special signal indicated, that the moment had come to spread the incense on the altar, as near as possible to the Holy of Holies. Priests and people had reverently withdrawn from the neighborhood of the altar, and were prostrate before the Lord, offering unspoken worship, in which record of past deliverance, longing for mercies promised in the future, and entreaty for present blessing and peace, seemed the ingredients of the incense, that rose in a fragrant cloud of praise and prayer. Deep silence had fallen on the worshippers, as if they watched to heaven the prayers of Israel, ascending in the cloud of 'odours' that rose from the golden altar in the Holy Place. Zacharias waited, until he saw the incense kindling. Then he also would have 'bowed down in worship,' and reverently withdrawn, had not a wondrous sight arrested his steps." [Edersheim, *Life of Messiah*] "The people, gathered 'outside' the sanctuary but 'inside' its courts are also praying, in a prostrate position and with outstretched hands. Then they wait for Zechariah to return from the altar of incense and to proceed eastward to the steps in the front of the sanctuary (Holy Place and Holy of Holies). On these steps Zechariah, accompanied by other priests, is expected to pronounce the Aaronic blessing on the people. This benediction will be followed by songs of praise, public offerings, etc." [Hendriksen, *Luke*]

v11 and there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord : note when the angel appeared to Zachariah: not at home but when he was serving the Lord; not publicly but when alone in the inner courts of the temple.

standing on the right side of the altar of incense : i.e. the south side, between the golden altar and the candlestick. Standing = the attitude of service.

v12 and when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled : = discomposed

and fear fell upon him : and no wonder, his senses now seeing what by faith alone we imagine (Jud 6:22; 13:22; Dan 10:5-9; Lk 1:29; 2:9; Acts 10:4; Rev 1:17).

v13 but the angel said unto him, fear not, Zacharias : "Thus by two familiar, endeared, exhilarating words, was the silence of four centuries broken, and thus unexpectedly, yet all noiselessly, was the curtain of a stupendous and enduring Economy in this world's history at once drawn up!" [Brown, *Luke*]

The angel spoke in the form of a command and could be translated “stop being afraid.” Wuest: “and the angel said to him, Stop fearing”

for thy prayer is heard : which prayer?

- without ever giving it a thought, I have always held this to be a reference to the prayer of Zacharias for a son. In favor of this interpretation, note the angel remarks about his prayer being heard then immediately tells him about the birth of John the Baptist, almost in the same breath.
- an alternate rendering which is new to my thinking is that the prayer the angel is referring to is for Israel, not himself. Items which point to that interpretation is that it would be unlikely that Zacharias would have taken such a solemn occasion to pray such a personal prayer, but rather for the redemption of Israel and the return of God’s favor upon the Jews. Note secondly that Zacharias and Elisabeth had obviously long given up hope for a son to be given them (vs18). Thirdly the word for “prayer” is in the aorist tense in the Greek, indicating a singular past event rather than a sequence of events or repeated events. This would give the understanding of “your (single) prayer has been heard” rather than “your many prayers you offered for a child has all been heard.”
- the balance: it must be noted neither of these teachings could ever be held dogmatically, this is more a matter of conjecture than interpretation. If one was bent on taking the meaning that the prayer was specifically for a child, then the fact that the word for prayer is singular could be taken to mean “all those prayers given for all those years are viewed as one”, or even simply that Zacharias did just add a personal note to his temple prayer. However, I tend to lean towards his prayer being one for the salvation of Israel which was answered by the Lord using him and his wife to bring forth the forerunner of the Lord Jesus Christ. Either of the interpretations find their answer in the birth of John, but the latter puts a little different emphasis as to the purpose for the birth of the child. I like that added emphasis.

and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son : through the very one whose barren condition was common knowledge. This would not only relieve them of their social offense, but would as well point to the miraculous nature of the birth and that this was the doing of the Lord. Note even the sex of the child is given prior to his birth, showing again His sovereign control of all circumstances, even in conception. The birth of any child is not an accident, but *children are a heritage of the Lord.* (Ps 127:3)

and thou shalt call his name John : Jochanan or Jehochanan = “Jehovah’s gracious gift, the Lord is gracious, Jehovah shows grace”

v14 and thou shalt have great joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth : gladness = exultation, great exuberant unrestrained joy. Not only would Zacharias and Elisabeth be filled with this exuberant gladness but others would also at his birth (1:58), as well as years later when he had grown to manhood. This is part of the immediate context (vs 16,17) and fulfilled by the many whom turned to the Lord through him (Mt 3:1-6; Mk 1:5). Even those who did not follow John recognized him as a prophet of God (Mt 14:1-5; 21:26,32; Lk 7:29).

v15 for he shall be great in the sight of the Lord : i.e. great *officially* beyond all the prophets that went before him (Mt 11:11). This is not a reference to John’s personal character, although that was evidently impeccable; but rather to his calling as the forerunner of the Messiah, the dignity of his office (Lk 1:76,77). It was John that preached the importance of personal repentance from our sins (Lk 3:3,8). It was John that pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God which took away our sins (Jn 1:29).

and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink : a strong negative in the Greek, with the sense of “he shall in no wise drink; he must never touch.” Wuest: “and wine and intoxicating beverage he will positively not drink.”

Was John a Nazarite? As the leper was the living symbol of sin, so the Nazarite (“separated one”) was the living symbol of holiness. The restrictions as given in Num 6:1-21 were that nothing alcoholic was to cross his lips, he was not to use a razor on his head, and no ceremonial defilement was to be contracted. Thus he was to be holy unto the Lord all the days of his separation. Although these restrictions were typically voluntary and temporary, both Samson (Jud 13:7; 16:17) and Samuel (1 Sam 1:11) are said to have been Nazarites from birth. Note that for both of them, the only restriction mentioned is that of the razor. Does this mean the other restrictions were implied? With John the only restriction was that of the wine and alcoholic beverages. Whether he was a Nazarite or not is open to argument, and there are solid teachers who differ on this. What is important and without question however is that he was to be totally consecrated to the special service for the Lord for his entire lifetime.

Note that while John may have been a *Nazarite*, Jesus was from the city of Nazareth and therefore called a *Nazarene*.

and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb : not a reference to special powers he used, for it is clear John did no miracles (Jn 10:41). Nor could the reference be to inspiration, for he spoke not God’s word until his public ministry began (Lk 3:2). The reference here is to *sanctification from the womb*, a necessity in the service of God. Being “*filled by the Spirit*” is a reference to the Spirit of God having full control, being fully surrendered to His will (Eph 5:18).

v16 and many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God : It is worth noting that the Lord considered Israel “His people” although they were in need of “turning to Him,” i.e. they were unconverted. This is mentioned in other places as well (Ps 78:1; Isa 1:3; Ez 16:21; et. al.). These are further indications and reminders that the covenant that the Lord made with Abraham was an *unconditional covenant* (Gen 17:7) and still in force today.

v17 and he shall go before Him : quoting from Mal 4:5,6. More than just a chronological statement of John the Baptist preceding Jesus, but he was to actually be the herald and forerunner of the Messiah, announcing and introducing his Master to His people.

an interesting note concerning Malachi's prophecy: it was Jehovah speaking, that the forerunner was to prepare the way for *Him*, i.e. Jehovah. This equates the Lord Jehovah of the OT with Jesus.

in the spirit and power of Elias : i.e. Elijah. Was John Elijah? If taken *literally*, the answer would be no. John could truthfully say he was not Elijah in that sense (Jn 1:21). But *figuratively*, the answer would be yes. Even Jesus referred to John in that sense (Mt 11:14; 17:12,13; Mk 9:11-13).

John clearly displayed the "spirit and power of Elijah" in several manners:

- both fell on evil times: Herod and Ahab
- both witnessed fearlessly for God: Elijah directly confronted Ahab and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:18-20); John directly confronted Herod as well as the Sadducees and Pharisees (Mt 3:7; 14:4)
- the message of both was repentance (1 Kings 18:21; Lk 3:8)
- neither was much seen except for direct exercise of their ministry (1 Kings 17:2-6; Mt 3:1)
- both were heads of schools of disciples (2 Kings 2:3; Jn 3:25; 4:1)
- the results of both could be expressed in the same terms: many (not all nor even a majority) would turn to the Lord through them

to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children : the natural implication is that Israel was far from the Lord. Two meanings to this phrase has been suggested:

- the verse taken literally would convey the truth "true conversion restores parental fidelity." This was also an issue with Malachi at a time when the family had been disrupted by mixed marriages and easy divorce (Mal 2:11,14-16). If the NT implies conditions were not any better in Jesus' day (Mt 5:32; 19:9), what more could be said of today?
- I believe the meaning is to be taken spiritual. Neither Elijah's nor John's ministry was directly aimed at the domestic issues, although that of course would have been affected as people responded to the Lord. Correcting the home problems would also have little to do with "preparing the way for the Lord." The "fathers" are the patriarchs which are pictured as looking down from heaven and being pleased with the conversion of their disobedient posterity. The same picture is given in Isa 29:22,23 in which Jacob looks on and is pleased with the ultimate outcome of his posterity. In another place Isaiah states the Lord is the God of Israel although Abraham and Jacob will not acknowledge them (Isa 63:16). Although I strictly see this as speaking metaphorically, Jesus stated that Abraham rejoiced to see His day, saw it, and was glad (Jn 8:56). Perhaps there a more of a reality to this than I am giving it. [note another passage used is the "cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1), i.e. believers in heaven encouraging living believers, which I believe to be an unnecessary interpretation]

and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just : to turn from the Lord is not only necessary but wise, to reject this is to be foolish and to love death (Prov 8:35,36).

wisdom = frame of mind, disposition; used in Eph 1:8 "wherein He hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and *prudence*", "that He lavished on us with all wisdom and *understanding*."

to make ready a people prepared for the Lord : the emphasis of this phrase is the Lord, not the people. This is not saying, "The Lord can come now, we're ready," in which the people are the subject and has been made ready for the Lord's coming (although this of course would be true; when one repents and are cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ, they are ready to stand before the Lord). Rather the "people prepared" are those who have turned from their sins and have therefore been "made ready" to be presented to the Lord. JFB suggests the reading should be "to make ready for the Lord a prepared people." Hendriksen agrees, translating the verse "in order to make ready for the Lord a people well-prepared." Edersheim: "make ready for the Lord a people prepared." Wuest: "to make ready for the Lord a people which has been placed in the right spiritual state." This is not a question of interpretation but one of emphasis.

v18 and Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. : had such a promise never been made and fulfilled before, the unbelief of Zacharias would have been more easily accounted for and less sinful. But when the same promise was made to Abraham, he staggered not through unbelief (Rom 4:20; Heb 11:11). When it's recorded that Abraham asked God "whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?" (Gen 15:8), it must be balanced with "he believed in the Lord, and He counted it to him for righteousness." (Gen 15:6). Gideon spoke in awe and reverence, "let not thine anger be hot against me... let me prove, I pray Thee,..." (Jud 6:39). Even Hezekiah was not so much doubting as wanting to believe in what the Lord had promised him, "what shall be the sign that the Lord will heal me?" (2 Kings 20:8). These could all be interpreted as possibly requests to strengthen their faith. Yet in spite of the fact that Zacharias has those examples, he still responded as if to say, "I don't believe you, for people as old as we are do not become parents." Godet makes the comment, "There are different degrees of responsibility, either according to the degree of development of the individual or of the age, or according to the character of the divine manifestation. God alone can determine these degrees. It appears from the 19th verse that

the appearance of the being who spoke to Zacharias ought of itself to have been a sufficient sign.” [Godet, *Luke*] “As God is glorified by implicit confidence in His promises - and just in proportion to the natural obstacles in the way of their fulfillment - so unbelief like that of Zacharias here is regarded as a dishonor put upon His word, and resented accordingly.” [Brown, *Luke*]

v19 And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel : in order to make Zacharias feel the seriousness of his fault, the angel refers to two things: his dignity as a divine messenger, and the nature of his message.

Gabriel’s name could mean “man of God, mighty one of God, Mighty (is) God, the might of God”; he also appeared to Daniel to explain the vision of the ram and the he-goat (Dan 8:16), to Daniel again to interpret the vision of the seventy weeks (Dan 9:21), and to Mary to announce she will bear the Messiah (Lk 1:26). The only other angel named in scripture is Michael (Dan 10:13,21; Jude 9; Rev 12:7).

that stand in the presence of God : as His attendant (cp 1 Kings 17:1). He could possibly be one of the seven angels which stand before God (Rev 8:2), but this is uncertain. The question could be asked, “but do not all the angels stand in God’s presence, beholding the face of the Father?” (Mt 18:10).

and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings :

v20 and, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season. : dumb = speechless. Zacharias asked for a sign and he got one; by his misuse of the tongue, his tongue would be silenced. But while the Lord dealt with Zacharias in justice “thou shalt be dumb,” He always tempers that with mercy towards His children “until the day these things shall be performed.”

v21 and the people waited for Zacharias : to receive from him the usual benediction (Num 6:23-27)

and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple : not usual to tarry long, lest it should be thought vengeance had stricken the people’s representative for something wrong. Another reason to hurry is given in the Talmud, stating that it was customary for the priest whose duty it was to offer incense to leave the altar as quickly as possible, “lest unwittingly he commit some act of profanation.”

v22 and when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless. : he was made deaf (from v62) and dumb. The word for *dumb* is *kōphos* “unable to speak, dumb,” but used in Lk 7:22 for the deaf. “Though the text nowhere states that fear was staring from the priest’s eyes, blanched his cheeks, and caused his limbs to tremble, something akin to this may well have been taking place. In any event, as a result of his sign language - perhaps nodding and gesturing - the people realized that Zechariah had seen a vision (cf Luke 24:23; Acts 26:19; 2 Cor 12:1), an awe-inspiring object or being, one generally invisible to human eyes.” [Hendriksen, *Luke*]

v23,24 and it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house. And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months : the reason for Elisabeth hiding herself is not given. Suggestions include that it was according to custom; that it was a result of false modesty; that Elisabeth wished to obtain assurance of the reality of her happiness before speaking about it; that it was a precaution for her health; that it was as a desire for meditation and sentiments of humble gratitude. But considering she had been barren and looked upon by many as being “judged by the Lord,” and especially when considering v25, she may have hid herself until the event was put beyond doubt, that people could look upon her and see the Lord had shown her favor. “Restored by God, she feels that she owes it to herself, as well as to Him who has honored her in this way, to expose herself no more to the scornful regards of men until she can appear before them evidently honored by the proofs of the divine favor.” [Godet, *Luke*]

“conceived” is the word *sunelaben* (also 1:31,36; 2:21); note *Doctor Luke* uses several other words to describe the relationship of women to pregnancy: Elisabeth was “barren, sterile” *steira* (1:7); Mary was “great with child” *egkuō* (2:5); a man should take his dead brother’s widow and raise up “seed” *sperma* (20:28); and in Jesus’ prophetic Temple discourse said woe to those “with child” *en gastri exousais* (21:23).

v25 saying, thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein He looked on me, to take away my reproach among men. : more here than a woman giving thanks for her offspring; she also was thankful for the *manner* in which the Lord had removed her reproach, in connection with the Hope of Israel.