

# The Greatest Life Ever Lived

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

LESSON XII : BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST / THE BENEDICTUS

Matthew	Mark	Luke 1:57-80	John	related passages
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**v57 Now Elisabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son. :** Elisabeth was now full-term, and brought forth the boy as promised by Gabriel.

**v58 And her neighbors and her cousins heard how the Lord had shewed great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her. :** showing natural interest and kindness, the neighbors and relatives visit Elisabeth. What did they hear? Literally, they heard "that the Lord was magnifying His mercy with her." Wuest: "... and the neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had lavished His mercy upon her." Commentators note that the phrase used reflects the fact that Luke is using an Aramaic / Hebrew source.

The emphasis here is the Lord's mercy in action (as well as v 50,54,55,72,78).

Note that part of a Christian's joy is rejoicing with the joyful.

**v59 And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; :** in accordance with the law the circumcision took place on the eighth day (Gen 17:12; Lev 12:3). There was probably an appointed person that did the circumcision while the others were functioning as witnesses.

"No domestic solemnity so important or so joyous as that in which, by circumcision, the child had, as it were, laid upon it the yoke of the Law, with all of duty and privilege which this implied. Even the circumstance, that it took place at early morning might indicate this. It was, so tradition has it, as if the father had acted sacrificially as High-Priest, offering his child to God in gratitude and love; and it symbolized this deeper moral truth, that man must by his own act complete what God had first instituted. To Zacharias and Elisabeth the rite would have even more than this significance, as administered to the child of their old age, so miraculously given, and who was connected with such a future." [Edersheim, *Life of Messiah*] Compare this tradition with those who baptize infants: they may find an example here, but as Baptists we see no directive from the Lord that would require us to follow to the degree many do. Although even most Baptists will perform a "baby dedication" service, we do not equate the rite of baptism with the ceremony of circumcision.

**and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father. :** in the OT the naming of the child is associated with the baby's birth (Gen 21:1-3; 25:24-26; etc.). Hendriksen states this (as well as 2:21) is the earliest witness to the practice of naming the child at the circumcision.

Some commentators state that there is no early testimonies that there was a custom of naming the child after its father, although v61 implies there may have been a custom of naming the child after a relative. Considering the beauty of the name ("Jehovah has remembered," see lesson 9 on Luke 1:5) and the fact that Zacharias was now "famous" due to his temple visitation, they wanted the boy named after his father. Edersheim however [*Life of Messiah*] states this was part of a benedictory prayer after the ritual of circumcision, in which the ceremony closed with a prayer over a cup of wine and the child was named. The prayer probably ran something like what Edersheim said was common in his day (late 1800s) : "Our God, and the God of our fathers, raise up this child to his father and mother, and let his name be called in Israel Zacharias, the son of Zacharias. Let his father rejoice in the issue of his loins, and his mother in the fruit of her womb, as it is written in Prov 28:25, and as it is said in Ez 16:6, and again in Ps 105:8, and Gen 21:4," the passages of course being quoted in full. It was at this point that Elisabeth interrupted the ceremony and stated the child was to be called John.

An interesting lesson on the Greek language may be found in this verse. The verse literally reads "the child (neuter in the Greek) ... and they called *it*." Compare this with Rom 8:16 "and the Spirit *itself*," a verse which some have used to teach the Holy Spirit is not the third Person of the trinity but merely an impersonal force of God. While the Greek uses the neuter (since the noun is neuter, the pronoun must agree), the English is best translated by *him* and *Himself*.

**v60 And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John. :** remembering the message of the angel (without doubt described to Elisabeth from Zacharias by use of a writing tablet) and having the testimony of unbelief presently in front of her, Elisabeth did not hesitate in stating what the child's name was to be.

The negative is intensive here, the sense is "Definitely not!" Wuest: "but his mother, answering said, By no means, but he shall be called John."

**v61 And they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name. :** tradition (if it was a tradition) could not nor should not override the clear directives of the Lord.

**v62 And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called. :** although opinions differ, I believe the best reason for the relatives to make signs to the father was because he was deaf. Hendriksen is weak here, stating they were excited and since

dumbness is often associated with deafness, they forgot he could hear. He also points out that while the Greek word *kōphos* may mean either deaf or dumb, he states it is not used in the NT of being *both* deaf and dumb. The angel likewise makes no mention of him not being able to hear but merely that he will not be able to speak. With all his explanations however, I still find it easier to explain the angel not mentioning Zacharias being deaf than I can explain why the relatives would make signs at Zacharias when he could hear. Allowing for the possibility of error, I believe Zacharias was struck deaf and dumb.

**v63 And he asked for a writing table, :** probably a little board covered with wax in which a stylus could make impressions of letters

**and wrote, saying, His name is John. :** not that “I want his name to be John” or “I think we should call him John,” but rather “his name *is* John,” emphasizing the fact that they were not now naming the baby but that the baby already *had* a name. God had named the child (vs 13).

Why John? The name means “Jehovah’s gracious gift, the Lord is gracious, Jehovah shows grace” (see lesson 9 on Luke 1:13). While it could generally be stated that biblical names have a meaning in the life of the bearer, how much more so when it is the Lord who names this child? How was John showing God’s grace? His preaching seemed to center on judgement and repentance rather than the goodness of God! There is a truth here that is often forgotten: *not only is it God’s grace that saves sinners, it is even the grace of God that warns sinners of judgement to come.* So Newton: “Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.” **God does not only not owe us salvation, He does not owe us the opportunity to be saved, nor even the opportunity to hear of our lost state.** As lost sinners *by choice* before a holy God, any action on the Lord’s part is unmerited. Any “rights” man may have held with the Lord was forfeited in the Garden of Eden

Note the evidence of a godly home: mother and father in agreement to God’s will.

**And they marvelled all. :** certainly not due to the agreement of Zacharias and Elisabeth, but either because of the total lack of hesitancy on either’s part, or more than likely the manner in which Zacharias responded which pointed to a higher Authority that had determined his name. Of course everyone would have recalled the astonishing events in the temple which preceded the birth of the child and would have been described by Zacharias to many.

**v64 And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God. :** in typical Hebrew phraseology, Zacharias’ speech returns (as did his hearing, I believe) according to the promise of the angel (vs 13,20). While Zacharias’ song of praise is recorded in v68-79, it is unsure whether this verse is referring to that song or just the general praise Zacharias was sounding forth.

“His last words had been those of unbelief, his first were those of praise; his last words had been a question of doubt, his first were a hymn of assurance.... The question of unbelief had struck the Priest dumb, for most truly unbelief cannot speak; and the answer of faith restored to him speech, for most truly does faith loosen the tongue. The first evidence of his dumbness had been, that his tongue refused to speak the benediction to the people; and the first evidence of his restored power was, that he spoke the benediction of God in a rapturous burst of praise and thanksgiving. The sign of the unbelieving Priest standing before the awe-struck people, vainly essaying to make himself understood by signs, was most fitting; most fitting also that, when ‘they made signs’ to him, the believing father should burst in their hearing into a prophetic hymn.” [Edersheim, *Life of Messiah*]

**v65 And fear came on all that dwelt round about them: and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judea. :** all these remarkable happenings filled the minds of the people with the conviction that God was present in their midst, and they were struck with a holy awe. The words “were noised abroad” is spoken of in the sense of continued action, meaning the people kept talking with one another, they kept discussing back and forth. The rural people without doubt spoke of these things for quite a while: the vision in the temple, Zacharias being struck deaf and dumb, a child being born of a barren woman advanced in years, the fact a boy was predicted and a boy was born, the opening of the lips of Zacharias and his praise of the Lord.

Note that **godly people discuss God’s deeds while the carnal gossip of man’s defects.** I should add that not all speech which uses God’s name is godly — my wife and I was working in children’s church at another church when an elderly lady insisted on gossiping about a Pastor. When the subject was attempted to be changed she commented, “Well, if I can’t talk about the Lord, I don’t know what to talk about.”

**v66 And all they that heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be! :** they pondered the significance, wondering what the incidents might mean in reference to the character and role of the child. Their hopes were high.

**And the hand of the Lord was with him. :** probably an additional remark added by Luke as led by the Holy Spirit. This phrase is a familiar one of Luke’s (Acts 11:21; 13:11). “Hand” here as is usually used is an emblem of force. What he is saying is this: the people held high expectations, and the people were not disappointed.

**v67 And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying, :** what follows must be attributed to the power of the Holy Spirit and not something natural from Zacharias himself. Note as his wife Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit (vs 41), she knew that Mary was more than her cousin but the mother of the Messiah, and she knew the babe within Mary’s womb was her Lord. So with Zacharias it was possible to see and say things which otherwise he would not have been able to see and say.

Also note as a side item, we believe this type of prophecy ceased upon the completion of the canon of scripture (1 Cor 13:8-13). I would be hesitant to say that the Lord *never* uses such methods today, for His power and ability has not decreased through the centuries. But I believe dogmatically that this type of direct communication is not His way in this age, and any exception to this would indeed be an exception and not the rule. He has given us His message today in the form of the word of God, and nothing needs added. **Our purpose is not to seek new revelations but to understand and obey the revelation that we have before us.**

Another name given to Zacharias' prophecy is *The Benedictus*, from the first word of this song in the Latin version: *Benedictus esto Dominus Deus Israelis*, meaning "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel." Edersheim believes this prophetic song closely follows "the most ancient Jewish prayer: the so-called Eighteen Benedictions." This was a great portion of the prayers said by the Priests before the lot was cast for incensing. "... it almost seems as if, during the long period of his enforced solitude, the aged Priest had meditated on, and learned to understand, what so often he had repeated." [Edersheim, *Life of Messiah*] A lesson we all should learn as well: is the Word of God living to us? Or is it something we have learned and it bears no effect on our lives?

<i>The Benedictus</i>			
first sentence, v68-75	Zachariah praises God for having provided salvation for His people, in fulfillment of prophecy and of His holy covenant with Abraham.	<i>Blessed be the Lord God of Israel;</i>	Ps 41:13; 73:18; 106:48
		<i>for He hath visited and redeemed His people,</i>	Ex 4:31; Ps 111:9
		<i>and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David;</i>	Ps 18:2; 132:17
		<i>(as He spake by the mouth of His holy prophets, which have been since the world began):</i>	Ezra 1:1; Jer 1:9; Zech 8:9
		<i>that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us;</i>	Ps 106:10
		<i>to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,</i>	Ps 25:6; 98:3; 136
		<i>and to remember His holy covenant; the oath which He sware to our father Abraham,</i>	Gen 12:2,2; 17:7; 22:15-18; Ex 2:24; 2 Sam 22:51; Ps 105:6-10; Mic 7:20
second sentence, v76-79	With firmly anchored hope, he summarizes the child's mission as a way-preparer for the Messiah, who he describes as the "Rising Sun" about to shine on those who sit in darkness.	<i>that He would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our life.</i>	Ex 19:6; Jer 30:9,10
		<i>And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways;</i>	Isa 40:3; Mal 3:1
		<i>to give knowledge of salvation unto His people by the remission of their sins,</i>	Ps 103:11,12; Isa 1:18; 43:25; 53:5,8,10,12; Jer 31:34; Mic 7:19
		<i>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.</i>	Ps 107:10; Isa 9:1; 42:7; 60:1-3; Mal 4:2

{ adapted mainly from Hendriksen, *Luke* }

Zacharias' prophecy may be divided into two parts, easily done since the entire song is actually only two long sentences. His prophecy in poetic form:

*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel;*  
*for He hath visited and redeemed His people,*  
*and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us*  
*in the house of His servant David;*  
*(as He spake by the mouth of His holy prophets, which have been since the world began):*  
*that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us;*  
*to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,*  
*and to remember His holy covenant;*

*the oath which He swore to our father Abraham,  
that He would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies  
might serve Him without fear,  
in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our life.*

*And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest:  
for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways;  
to 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.*

**v68 Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He hath visited and redeemed His people, :** Zacharias begins with a doxology, praising the Lord for His concern and His intervention in their affairs.

God “visited” His people: same word as in v78. The word means primarily “to inspect, to look upon, care for, exercise oversight,” and is used to mean (a) a visitation with help, as in an act of the Lord (Lk 1:68,78; 7:16; Acts 15:14; Heb 2:6; (b) to visit the sick and afflicted (Matt 25:36,43; James 1:27; (c) to go and see, pay a visit to (Acts 7:23; 15:36; (d) to look out certain men for a purpose (Acts 6:3 in the choosing of deacons). [Vine’s Expository Dictionary of NT Words] This “visitation” by God naturally implies that He was absent, referring to the four centuries in which God sent no prophet and heaven was silent.

Is the redemption spoken here political or spiritual? It could mean either, and the context would have to decide. In favor of the redemption being spiritual is v74,75 which speaks of serving the Lord in holiness and righteousness; v77 which speaks of the Messiah forgiving their sins; and v79 speaks of guiding their feet into the path of peace. In favor of political redemption, v71,74 speaks of Israel’s enemies and v72 speaks of the covenant with Abraham. If Zacharias has the spiritual meaning here which would not have been common for the Jews at that time, it must be remembered he was speaking under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Along those same lines is a lesson for us all: we must be careful if we are to give an accurate exposition the Word of God. We in our age naturally think of the spiritual aspect foremost of all, while the Jews of that time would think primarily of a physical, material salvation (from the yoke of Rome, the kingdom, etc.). Why did the Jews put Jesus on the cross? Why did Judas betray Jesus? Primarily because their expectations of the Messiah was not being met in the meek and lowly Jesus, the Lamb that would sacrifice His blood *for our eternal, spiritual salvation from sin*. They erred. But that is not to deny the kingdom, for when Jesus was ascending into heaven His disciples asked about the coming physical, literal kingdom. Jesus did not rebuke them for their misapplication of scripture, but rather said it was not for them to know the times or the season. *The literal kingdom is coming.*

**v69 and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David; :** “horn” symbolizes power, and typically destructive power. The underlying picture is one of a ram’s horn, a wild ox or a bull. “Just as the strength of an animal is concentrated in its horn, so all the delivering power granted to the family of David for the advantage of the people will be concentrated in the Messiah.” [Godet, *Luke*] By means of knocking out and scattering the enemy, the horn becomes a “horn of salvation” for Israel.

Note the reference to the house of David, and not the house of Levi. This “horn of salvation” was not the son of Zacharias, but that of Mary. This is another “backhanded” reference in support that Mary herself belonged to the tribe of Judah and a direct descendent of David, because at this point in time Zacharias would have had no way of know if Mary was to marry Joseph for sure.

“hath raised up” is a singular past action by God, indicating Zacharias knew of the incarnation, the babe within the womb of cousin Mary.

**v70 as He spake by the mouth of His holy prophets, which have been since the world began: :** that this was spoken of by the prophets is undeniable (Lk 24:27,44-47; Acts 10:43). Note also that it was the Lord that spoke, the prophets were only His mouthpiece.

<i>The prophet</i>	<i>The description of the Messiah</i>	<i>Scripture reference</i>
Moses	“the Prophet whom God would raise up”	Deut 18:15,18; Acts 3:22,23; 7:37
David	“the One who would sit on God’s right hand”	Ps 16:10; 110:1; Mt 26:64; Acts 2:25-27; Heb 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2
Isaiah	“Immanuel, Wonderful, Counselor,” etc., “the One wounded for our transgressions”	Isa 7:14; 8:8; 9:6; 53
Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah	“the Branch”	Isa 11:1; Jer 33:15; Zech 3:8; 6:12,13
Jeremiah	“the Lord our Righteousness”	Jer 23:6
David, Ezekiel, Zechariah	“the Shepherd”	Ps 23; Isa 40:11; Ez 34:23; Zech 13:7; Matt 26:31; Mk 14:27; Lk 19:10; Jn 10:11,14-16,26-28
Daniel	“a Son of man whose dominion is an everlasting dominion”	Dan 7:13,14; Matt 26:64; Mk 14:62
Micah	“Ruler in Israel”	Mic 5:2; Matt 2:6
Malachi	“the Angel of the Covenant”	Mal 3:1

{ adapted mainly from Hendriksen, *Luke* }

**v71 that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; :** if spiritual, a picture of Jesus conquering Satan and his allies: sin, death, the grave, hell, and all the hosts of evil (Gen 3:15; Jn 12:31,32; 16:11,33; 1 Jn 3:8; Rev 5:5; 12:5,9,10; 17:14; 19:11-16). If taken in earthly redemption, the “enemies” would refer to the foreign heathen oppressors and “those that hate us” to the native tyrants, specifically Herod and his associates.

Note whether the meaning here is spiritual or political, among those “who hate us” are people. This is not a reason for us to return their hatred however (Matt 5:44).

**v72,73 to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant; the oath which He swore to our father Abraham, :** by rescuing His people from their enemies and providing salvation, the Lord is remembering His covenant agreements with the Jewish founders (Heb 6:13-18). Thus E. Mote “*Christ the Solid Rock*” : “His oath, His covenant, His blood, support me in the whelming flood.”

Most of the verse is identical with v54,55 of Mary’s song (see lesson 11).

**v74,75 that He would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our life. :** this provides the purpose of why the Lord has done all of the above. The sense of what’s been said is “the God of Israel brought about redemption for His people for this purpose: that we, being rescued from our enemies, may now serve Him all of our lives in holiness and righteousness.” When we are saved *from* something, we are saved *for* something; namely, to serve others for God’s glory.

We are to serve God:

- **without fear**, a natural result of being delivered from our enemies (Ps 27:1; 56:11; Rom 8:31-39)
- **in holiness and righteousness**, a separated life unto God in which we walk uprightly with other men (1 Pet 2:9)
- **in His presence**, since we live and move under the eye of God (Ps 139)
- **all of our lives**, not just for a short duration; when the Lord is finished with us, He takes us home (Phil 2:21)

**v76 And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: :** Zacharias just now turns to his own child. Zacharias was not chiefly concerned about himself or even his new-born son, but of the work of God in providing the Messiah.

John was to be called the prophet of the Highest, which he was (Matt 11:9; 14:5; 21:26).

**for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways; :** the ways or paths of the Lord are those along which He proceeds in order to bestow His salvation, with repentance and faith specifically being meant here in the life of John (Isa 40:3; Mal 3:1; Matt 3:3). Note as well that in the OT the reference was of Jehovah while in the NT the reference is applied to Jesus. The mystery of the trinity is presented therefore as we attribute deity to the incarnate Son of God, the OT Jehovah manifested in the flesh.

**v77 to give knowledge of salvation unto His people by the remission of their sins, :** how was John to make ready a path for the Lord? By providing for His people the knowledge of how to come to their Saviour. Note that the salvation provided by the Lord is through forgiveness and not the compiling of our own merits before the Lord.

“Why was the ministry of the Messiah preceded by that of another divine messenger? Because the very notion of salvation was

falsified in Israel, and had to be corrected before salvation could be realized. A carnal and malignant patriotism had taken possession of the people and their rulers, and the idea of political deliverance had been substituted for that of a moral salvation.” [Godet, *Luke*]

**v78 through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the Dayspring from on high hath visited us, :** “Dayspring” = literally “rising” as in the rising sun, the dawn. The same word is used in Matt 2:2 “where is the king of the Jews? for we have seen His star in the east ... “. Here without doubt a reference to Mal 4:2 about the coming “sun of righteousness with healing in his wings,” and is used to provide the picture in the following verse.

**v79 to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, :** the purpose of the Rising Sun is to shine on those in darkness, phrases taken from Isa 9:1,2 and quoted in Matt 4:16. Sitting in darkness and death’s shadow indicates a condition of danger, fear, and hopelessness. Darkness is used often in scripture to indicate the condition of man’s heart, that of delusion, blindness, depravity, and despondency (Isa 9:2,3; Acts 26:18; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 4:18).

**to guide our feet into the way of peace. :** those who a moment ago were *sitting* in hopeless darkness is now *walking*, being led by the Light. We have all turned astray and gone our own way, not knowing the way of peace (Isa 53:6; 59:8,9) when the Sun rises and directs our feet into the path of peace.

**v80 And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel. :** the infancy narrative closes with a historical note. As any normal boy, John grew up both physically (the child grew) and spiritually (and waxed strong in spirit). “Waxed strong in spirit” refers to the fact that John’s will overcame the instincts and inclinations of the body through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Considering the advanced age of his parents, it would be easy to imagine John being an orphan early in life.

A lesson illustrated here as well as in the lives of Moses, Paul and many others is that if we’re going to influence others, we must first prepare ourselves by being alone with God.

“shewing” denotes the installation of a servant into his office, his official institution into his charge. The one installing John into this office is unnamed but understood to be the Lord. Wuest: “... and was in the uninhabited regions until the day of his official presentation to Israel.”