

2. Two Miraculous Births

JOHN'S FAMILY BACKGROUND

John's lineage was flawless as the Jews considered it. His father Zecharias was a priest, of the eighth course of Abijah (**1 Chr 24:10; Lk 1:5**). John's mother Elisabeth was a direct descendant of Aaron. The Divine record says they were *"both righteous before God, walking in all commandments and ordinances of the Lord."* (**Lk 1:6**) Elisabeth was childless, a significant trial in her life (**Lk 1:25**). There is a strong similarity with the lives of Abraham and Sarah. Both were faithful (**Gen 18:11; Lk 1:7**), there was disbelief about the announcement of the child (**Gen 18:12; Lk 1:18**) and the sons were long awaited children of promise (**Gal 4:23; Rom 9:8-9**). Salvation was in both cases to come through the fulfilment of promises.

Similarly, Jesus' mother Mary was a virtuous woman with a thorough appreciation of God's Word. Mary was from the line of David (**Lk 1:5**). By birth, Jesus was therefore from the royal line. This ensured that Jesus Christ is the rightful king-priest who will sit on his father's throne in the Kingdom.

LUKE 1:5-38 GABRIEL APPEARS TO ZECHARIAS AND MARY

The first events we read in the Gospels is the announcement of two miraculous births. Firstly John, the prophet of the Most High (**Lk 1:76**), secondly Jesus, the Son of the Most High (**Lk 1:32**, cp. **Psa 87:5**). The majority of Jews had drifted away from God. The priesthood was corrupt and focussed on ritual and outward show. However there were those in Israel who remained faithful in evil times. **Luke 2:22-38** tells of Simeon and Anna who were waiting for the *"consolation of Israel"* and the *"redemption of Jerusalem."* These were believers loved of God. He had not forgotten them.

The birth of John the Baptist was an integral part of God's plan for bringing His Son into the world. The prophet Micah declared that *"the sun shall go down over the prophets and the day shall be dark over them"* (**Mic 3:6**) After 400 years the light was to burst upon the world. John was a light that flared up brightly for a short moment, to lead people to the true light

John 1:6-8 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. **He was not that Light**, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.

Zacharias and Elisabeth were providentially selected by God. The barrenness they experienced meant John's birth was a miracle, as it also was with Sarah (**Gen 11:30**), Rachel (**Gen 29:31**), Hannah (**1 Sam 1:5-6**), Rebekah (**Gen 25:21**) and Samson's mother (**Jud 13:2**). **Luke 1:10** says *"the whole multitude of the people were praying at the time of incense."* The altar of incense in the tabernacle and Solomon's temple represented prayer (**Ex 30:1-10; 1 Chr 28:18; Song 3:6; 4:6,14; Psa 141:2; Rev 5:8**).

Prayer is very powerful even if God's response is not immediately evident. This faithful man waited most his lifetime for this moment. Gabriel immediately says to him, *"thy prayer is heard"* (**Lk 1:13**)

Despite the age of childbearing having long passed, their specific prayers for a child of their own most likely would have ceased. However it is highly likely they continued to pray for the coming of Messiah in their days, as did Simeon and Anna (**Lk 2:32-38**).

Believing God has heard our prayers and will respond in His own time takes real faith (**2 Chr 7:14; 1 Jn 5:14-15**). We must turn to God in prayer for all aspects of life, believing He does care and that He loves to see us respond to Him (**Psa 145:8; Mt 7:7-11; Lk 18:1; Phil 4:6; 1 Thess 5:17**). We must be patient, having faith that many of our prayers will be finally answered at Christ's return. Sometimes God says "No" because He knows what is best for us. When angels appear to faithful believers, they reassure them **not to fear** but that they are here to help them (**Gen 15:1; 26:24; 46:3; Josh 8:1; Jud 6:23; Dan 10:12; Mt 1:20; Lk 2:10**). Angels are God's messengers, so this tells us something wonderful about our Heavenly Father that is very reassuring (**Heb 1:14**).

Gabriel says John will be a Nazarite (**Lk 1:15**). In **Numbers 6:1-8** we read about the Nazarite vow. This gave Israelites opportunity to voluntarily imitate the priesthood even if they were not of the tribe of Levi. John however was already a Levite. As a Nazarite John was going to live above the priesthood of the law. The meaning of their names told a beautiful story: *"Yahweh hath remembered"* (**Zacharias**) *"the oath of my God"* (**Elisabeth**) so through *"the grace of God"* (**John**) this would be accomplished.

The angel's identity is revealed as Gabriel (**Lk 1:19**). Zacharias would have known the significance of this. His last recorded visit was 600 years earlier to Daniel (**Dan 9:2**), a prophet engaged in prayer on behalf of his people. Gabriel was sent to Daniel to provide him with an understanding of the promise of Christ and his work *"to finish the transgression and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity and to bring in everlasting righteousness"* (**Dan 9:24**) Imagine the shock when he says *"I am Gabriel that stands in the presence of God."* (**Lk 1:19**)

Zacharias was struck dumb as a sign that rebuked his temporary unbelief but which strengthened his faith. Six months later Gabriel appears to a poor, young woman who did believe. There is a clear contrast between the two encounters. Zacharias expressed doubt, saying *"whereby shall I know this?"* (**Lk 1:18**) whereas Mary says *"Behold, the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word."* Elisabeth in praise to Mary says, *"Blessed is she that believed."* (**Lk 1:45**) Faith in what God says is crucially important today in an age when many look for any excuse to get around what God has written in His Word. Without faith it is impossible to please God (**Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3; 10:17; Heb 11:1-6,13**).

John the Baptist and Jesus were closely connected even in the announcement of their births. Both involved faithful, righteous women (**Lk 1:6,28**). Both were women who had never conceived before (**Lk 1:7,27**). Both announcements were by the angel Gabriel (**Lk 1:19,26**). Both Zacharias and Mary were greatly troubled at the angel's appearance (**Lk 1:12,29**). Both were central to the Divine plan (**Lk 1:16,32**). Both parents were provided Divine guidance and care after birth (**Lk 1:80; 2:52**)



LUKE 1:39-56 MARY AND ELIZABETH

Mary earnestly runs to Elisabeth's house. She would have been overwhelmed with what had come upon her. We can be sure that Mary and Elisabeth had a thorough knowledge of the coming of Messiah. He was to be born in Bethlehem (**Mic 5:2**), born of a virgin (**Isa 7:14**), in the line of Abraham (**Gen 12:3,7; 22:18**), from the tribe of Judah (**Gen 49:10**) and heir to David's throne (**2 Sam 7:12-13; Isa 9:7**). So imagine Elisabeth's joy when Mary comes to her! John *"leaped in her womb for joy"* (**Lk 1:41,44**). As the friend of the bridegroom he later said he *"rejoiced greatly because of the bridegroom's voice."* (**Jn 3:29**) Similarly the shepherds (**Lk 2:10-11**). It is the same for all believers through the ages.

Elisabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, and expresses her appreciation of the enormity of Mary's historic calling (**Lk 1:41-45**). We are then given the most beautiful expression of appreciation and thankfulness by Mary (**Lk 1:46-55**). Here is expressed a similar expression of joy to that of Sarah in **Gen 21:6-7**. Careful meditation on Mary's words is highly recommended. Mary's reference to the *"strength of His arm"* (**Lk 1:51**) is from **Psalms 98:1**. This principle is also expressed in many other Scriptures, including **Isa 40:10; 52:10; 53:1; 59:16; 62:8; 63:5**. The principle of *"the imagination of men's hearts"* is from Scriptures such as **Gen 6:5; Jer 3:17; 7:24; 9:14; 11:8; 13:10; 16:12; 18:12; 23:17**. Mary is thankful that God reaches down and cares for those who are poor (**1 Sam 2:7-8; Psa 72:12; Isa 55:1; Mt 6:19-21; Lk 6:20-25**). She appreciates that this is the seed promised to Abraham (**Gen 22:16-18**).

Here is the heartfelt response of a **young person** to the love of God. Mary's speech is one of the three prophetic speeches concerning Christ in the months before he was born. The others are those of Zacharias (**Lk 1:67-79**) and Simeon (**Lk 2:28-32**). Similar examples of faithful women's words are those of Miriam (**Ex 15:21**), Deborah (**Judges 5**) and Hannah (**1 Sam 2:1-10**).

LUKE 1:57-80 ZACHARIAS' PROPHECY OF THANKSGIVING

Here is a beautiful expression of joy and thanksgiving similar in structure to the Psalms, with many allusions to **Psalms** throughout. One way to read the prophecy is in 2 sections. The **first (1:68-75)** speaks of the coming of Messiah. The **second (1:76-79)** speaks of John's role in Christ's ministry. Importantly, he speaks of God's covenants to David (**1:68-71**) and Abraham (**1:72-75**), both of which are central to the gospel. Important Scriptures alluded to are **Gen 22:15-18; Deut 18:15,18; 2 Sam 7:10-23; 1 Kgs 1:48; Psa 105:8,42; 132:11,14-18; Isa 9:2; 59:7-9,20; Jer 31:31-34; Mal 4:2-6**.

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