

Elizabeth

Sermon Preached by Phil Kayser at DCC on 2021-11-28

God used many details to prepare for the Messiah (Luke 1-3)

I have long ago been convinced that nothing in life happens by accident. It's not by accident that John ended up sick today and can't preach. God is in the small and the big events of life. Not a leaf can fall from a tree without God willing it to be so. Jesus said that not a hair can fall from your heads without the Father - so you can have new confidence in your bald spots. It's the Father's will.

And in this story we will see that God was preparing the way for Jesus to be born long before that event. The genealogy shows God's perfect crafting of a lineage that included broken, rejected, and hurting people who were embraced by God in order to be the ancestors of Jesus and examples of the kind of people Jesus saves. God ensured that Mary and Elizabeth would be cousins without in any way jeopardizing the lineage of Jesus to David and John to Levi - two totally different tribes. And there are two theories of how that could happen: one is that Elizabeth's mom was from Judah and was adopted into the tribe of Levi. The other theory is that Mary's mom was from Levi and was adopted into the tribe of Judah. If the latter theory is true, then Jesus would have both royal and priestly genes. But there were many other details that had to be controlled for this story to work out. God had to make Elizabeth infertile for most of her life before John came along. Fertility and infertility is from God and has its purposes. It was not by accident that Israel was in a backslidden condition, or that a tyrant was ruling, or that Zacharias was by lot assigned to burn the incense that day, or that his course of priests were on duty that day. It was not by accident that John would be born six months earlier than Jesus and start his ministry earlier than Jesus. He was to be the forerunner. He had to be born just when he was. The point is that we can trust that God is in the smallest details of our lives - including the heartbreaking frustrations that sometimes plague us. Though Satan was trying to weave sinister threads into the plot of Elizabeth's life, God was taking *those same threads* and counter-weaving something masterful and beautiful.

An overview of her story

Let's start by looking at her background.

Elizabeth descended from the high priestly family of Aaron (1:5)

Verse 5 shows that Elizabeth was from the family line of Aaron, the high priest. And Zacharias was a priest authorized by God to work in the Holy of Holies. This was why John the Baptist would later be allowed to baptize without anyone questioning his credentials. He was a Levite. Levites regularly baptized converts and their families. Verse 5 says,

There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

It's OK to spell Elizabeth with an s or a z. It comes from the Hebrew, Elishaba, which means, my God is fullness or happiness. And we will see that even though she didn't have children, she was full and she had learned to find satisfaction in God. Others claim the name means, "my God is an oath," or is totally trustworthy. God was her joy and her reward that she completely trusted in. So either meaning for the name fits Elizabeth. And unlike two of the sons of the original Elizabeth, Nadab and Abihu, *her* son would be a faithful representative of God despite the apostasy prevalent in Israel. So there may be a deliberate contrast that God intended between this Elizabeth and the first Elizabeth, who was the wife of Aaron.

A family of faithful, godly, law-abiding steadfastness (Luke 1:6)

Verse 6 says,

And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

That is quite a testimony. It doesn't mean that they never had sin in their hearts, but it does mean that they had achieved such a high degree of holiness that others didn't see outward sinful behavior. She and her husband were both righteous and daily walked in all God's commandments and ordinances so faithfully that no one could successfully accuse them of breaking God's law. The word "commandments" refers to the moral law and the word "ordinances" either refers to the ceremonial law or the case laws of God. They daily lived by the Bible. And this righteousness was not simply a horizontal righteousness that was intended to fake other people out. No, the text says that they were righteous before *God*. *God* approved of their walk. This is significant for two reasons:

First, it shows that it is possible to be blameless - not sinless, but blameless. Though the book of Job later reveals that there was sin in Job's heart - and thus the need for him to offer up daily sacrifices, the first verse says, "Job... was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil." And even after Satan brought catastrophe after catastrophe upon Job, Job 1:22 says, "In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong." 1 Timothy 3 verses 2 and 10 shows that both elders and deacons are supposed to be blameless. And it is not just officers that are expected by God to maintain a godly testimony. Philippians 2:14-15 says that God's grace can enable you to be like Elizabeth. It says,

Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,

In other words, it's not a theoretical blamelessness. He wants your testimony to the world to be blameless and showcasing the grace of God. And the reason I bring these Scriptures up is that it is easy to emphasize total depravity so much that we fail to appreciate the radical change that happens in a Christian when he is regenerated. He is given a new heart, new orientations, new desires, new power, and new direction. Does he fall? Yes, toddlers fall a lot and new Christians will fall a lot. But God expects there to be growth in every Christian till they get to the place where they are living so victoriously that they are blameless. You will still have to confess sins of the heart, and lack of faith, and bad motives, and pride occasionally rearing its head, and fleeting bad thoughts, and occasional bad

attitudes. But you eventually catch those so quickly that they don't manifest outwardly. Don't allow the fact that we corporately confess the sins of the bride as a whole to make you not even try to be holy. I know one antinomian Reformed Seminary professor who justifies his addictions as if that elevates grace and the beauty of justification. It does not. Titus 2 would say that it slanders God's grace, which is designed to make us deny ungodliness and worldly lusts. Verse 14 says, "who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works." This professor is not appropriating the grace of God like Zacharias and Elizabeth were. It is true that all of us will daily need God's forgiveness and grace, but it is also true that God's grace will enable us to walk blameless in a perverse world. The point is that we must set our aim for sanctification much higher than we tend to do.

This means that their childlessness was not a discipline from God (Luke 1:7)

But the second reason this statement is significant is that they were without child. Verse 7 says,

But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.

The Pharisees had a tendency to blame childlessness on God's judgment of sin. They did that because Deuteronomy 28 promised children as a blessing of God. So at least the Pharisees (and perhaps others) would have assumed that she was in sin; otherwise she would be pregnant by now. And verse 25 refers to this reproach that others were assuming and making about her. But God loved this couple, approved of their lifestyle, saw that they walked in His forgiveness and grace. They were not childless because of God's disapproval. This was not a discipline in their life. And that should be a comfort to those who have not been able to have children. God has His purposes.

But this didn't make them passive; they still prayed for a child (1:13)

But this didn't make them passive about their condition either. Interestingly, even though she was way past menopause, they both still prayed for a child. When the angel comes to Zacharias, verse 13 records,

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

A number of my commentaries insist that the grammar necessitates that the prayer that had been heard was the prayer to have a child. Given the fact that Elizabeth was both barren and past menopause, this would require a miracle. And yet he prays for it. This seems to indicate that they knew nothing was too hard for El Shaddai. They knew God had given a son to Sarah when she was past menopause. So they never stopped praying for a child. And God now answers this prayer. And to me this is one of many indicators that we don't need to be passive about issues related to infertility. We should do what we can and trust God with the results. And God was obviously behind this infertility because He wanted John to be recognized far and wide as an unusual child, with an unusual upbringing, and an unusual mission - preparing the way for Messiah.

But in a few minutes we are going to be seeing that Zacharias actually doesn't believe his own prayer will be answered. And he is rebuked by the angel for his unbelief. So why is he praying? It could be out of habit. And it wouldn't surprise me if he was praying out of habit because *Elizabeth* still had hope. She was not rebuked for her unbelief. In any case, there is prayer for a child.

The joy that would come from her child (1:14-17). They would be preparing him to prepare Israel for the Messiah

Verses 14-17 show the incredible joy that this child would bring. And we can't cover everything in these amazing verses, but let's at least read them:

14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. 15 For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. [It appears he is going to be a Nazarite.] He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, "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."

Wow! I wish I could preach on every phrase in that section. But I want to particularly focus on what an unusual child Elizabeth would be raising. She would be raising a child filled with the Holy Spirit from an early age. This wouldn't mean that John was sinless, but it would indicate a much easier child to raise in the fear and nurture of the Lord. John would much more quickly connect with the disciplines and the instructions from Scripture than a child who was not filled with the Holy Spirit. And it shows that we should daily pray for our children that they would be captured by the Lord, filled with the Spirit, and become passionate about His Word. His upbringing in this home was perfect preparation of John to prepare for the Messiah.

Zacharias stumbles in faith (1:18-23)

But Zacharias, who had been praying for a child (perhaps out of habit now), suddenly stumbles in faith. And how many times does that happen to us? We pray and then go on about our life as if God is not going to answer. Again, just reading verses 18-23:

Luke 1:18 And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."

Luke 1:19 And the angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. 20 But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time."

Oops! He's praying for a child and is skeptical it will happen even when God sends an angel to tell him it will happen. Yes, such lack of faith can happen to even such blameless people. It's hard to persevere in praying for something without your faith waning over time. It shouldn't, but it can. And it's another illustration that being blameless does not mean being sinless. Verse 21:

Luke 1:21 And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple. 22 But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless.

Luke 1:23 So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house.

When he got home he wouldn't be able to communicate by voice, but we later discover that he started keeping a tablet around in order to communicate his thoughts. And we have no inkling that Elizabeth doubted the words that came from her husband. She knows a miracle has happened to his speech, and that an angel visited him, and now knows the message that the Lord had sent. It appears that she believed it with simple faith.

God blesses them with a child in old age (Luke 1:24-25)

Of course, God uses means, so they are intimate. Verse 24 says, "Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived..." Intimacy in old age is not wrong (as some suppose). In fact, it is commanded. Proverbs 5:19 - "let her breasts satisfy you at all times [not just when she is young], and always be enraptured by her love [not just when she is young]." 1 Corinthians 7:5 - "Do not deprive one another... come together again so that Satan does not tempt you."

And the desire to be a mother is a God-given desire. But we see something unusual happening in verse 24. Rather than excitedly telling all her friends that she is pregnant, it says, "and she hid herself five months..." There have been all kinds of conjectures about why she hid herself - especially since there was no Jewish custom to hide oneself during the first five months. But the way Luke writes verses 24-25 seems to indicate a God-centered reason.

and she hid herself five months, *saying*, [and here comes her reason for hiding herself] 25 "Because thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

This was not about what others would think. This was a God-thing, and she was going to focus on God and communion with God during most of those five months. She *could* have easily have taken away her *own* reproach that the people had given her by telling them all that she was pregnant, but she is not worried about what others think. She has a God-centered focus here. And even in that she is a model to us to get to the place where we are not driven by what others think; we are much more driven by what God thinks of us.

The controversy of how she could be a relative of Mary (Luke 1:36)

Verse 26 shows that Mary will get pregnant in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. In my book on December 25, Jewish Style, I get into some of the tiny details like this reference to six months to deal with a very complicated chronology. But I believe all the pieces fit together to point to a December 25 birth for Jesus in 5 BC, with the next possible date being January 6 of 4 BC. I won't get into any of that today.

But in verse 36 we have a controversy. The angel is communicating with Mary that she will have a baby. And the angel says,

Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren.

The controversy is, “How could Mary be a relative of Elizabeth?” And actually, seven of the translations I have translate this as “your cousin.” How could they be related, let alone be cousins, when Elizabeth and Mary clearly come from totally different tribes? Luke 1:5 makes it clear that Elizabeth was descended from the line of Aaron, who was of the tribe of Levi. But Luke 3 indicates that Mary’s father was Heli, of the tribe of Judah, and Hebrews 7:14 makes clear that Jesus arose from the tribe of Judah, and Romans 1:3 speaks of “Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh.” So Mary had to be a descendant of David, not Levi. For Jesus to be of the seed of David according to the flesh, Mary would have to be from the line of David. So people have been puzzled on how the two of them could be related.

The solution is actually quite easy: either Elizabeth’s mother was from the tribe of Judah and had been adopted into the tribe of Levi by marriage or Mary’s mother was from the tribe of Levi and had been adopted into the tribe of Judah. All that mattered for Mary’s line to be of the tribe of David is for each *father* to be descended from David - and that was clearly the case. Last week I said off-the-cuff that Elizabeth’s mother was adopted from Judah into Levi. But it could have been the reverse. Frédéric Godet prefers to think that it was *Mary’s* mother who was adopted from Levi into Judah - and that is definitely a possibility. He says,

There was no law to oblige an Israelitish maiden to marry into her own tribe; Mary’s father, even if he was of the tribe of Judah, might therefore have espoused a woman of the tribe of Levi.¹

So, built right into the immediate story of Elizabeth and Mary we have yet another indication that tribal intermarriage was not frowned on by God. God made provision for it. If it was Mary’s mother who crossed tribal lines, then it would mean that Christ had both priestly and royal blood - which is a cool thought. He is after all a Priest-King. But since the Scripture doesn’t say, we can’t know which ancestor did the cross-over during marriage. But there is no problem in calling Elizabeth and Mary first cousins and calling John and Jesus second cousins.

Mary’s visit to her cousin (Luke 1:39-56)

Verses 39-56 cover Mary’s visit to her cousin, Elizabeth.

Luke 1:39 Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, 40 and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth.

Even during the trials of pregnancy, hospitality can be a way to serve the Lord. But the mere arrival of Mary produced a prophecy as the Holy Spirit in both women celebrated this first meeting of the two unborn children.

41 And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, “Blessed are

¹ Frédéric Louis Godet, A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke, trans. Edward William Shalders and M. D. Cusin, vol. 1 (New York: I. K. Funk & co., 1881), 94.

you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. 45 Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord.”

So we have the Holy Spirit at work in four people here: Elizabeth and John and in Mary and Jesus. For John to leap with joy required some prophetic recognition of the presence of the Messiah. And infants within the womb have been shown to know far more than we thought they did. Joy is a rational attribute and there are verses that speak of babies trusting God in the womb, sinning in the womb, and knowing things in the womb. I highly recommend that moms and dads read to their children in the womb, play worship music, and avoid movies that would be toxic to a baby's emotions. Even scientific studies show that babies are attuned to the sounds and other things happening around them when they are in the womb. And this is one of several Scriptures that indicate the care we need to exercise in providing a nurturing environment to our unborn babies.

Moving on - the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary and she utters a remarkable prophecy that spoke of the kingdom realities that both women had anticipated with longing for so long. I won't preach on it, but I will read it because it would have powerfully impacted Elizabeth.

Luke 1:46 And Mary said: “My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. 48 For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. 49 For He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is His name. 50 And His mercy is on those who fear Him From generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. 52 He has put down the mighty from their thrones, And exalted the lowly. 53 He has filled the hungry with good things, And the rich He has sent away empty. 54 He has helped His servant Israel, In remembrance of His mercy, 55 As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and to his seed forever.”

The next verse says that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three whole months - that is, for the rest of Elizabeth's pregnancy. The two of them no doubt talked endlessly and excitedly about the coming Messianic kingdom and the exciting things that God was about to do.

Mary was young enough to be Elizabeth's daughter, so I'm sure there was also a lot of helpful advice and guidance that Elizabeth gave. Their two sons would be about the same age and both were called to ministry. There would have been a ton to talk about. But Mary leaves just before it is time for Elizabeth to go into labor.

The birth, circumcision, and naming of John the Baptist (Luke 1:57-66)

And speaking of labor and birth, we see how God-centered she was even in this birth. Verses 57-58 show the first thing to come out of her mouth after the baby was born. She is talking to the midwife and to her friends *about the Lord*. It says,

Luke 1:57 Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son. 58 When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her.

Elizabeth is rejoicing in God's mercies and they are rejoicing in God's mercies. I'm sure there was a lot of oohing and ahing over the baby too, but this event was a God-centered event. They were all bringing the Lord into the discussion.

Then comes the circumcision and naming of the baby.

Luke 1:59 So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias. 60 His mother answered and said, “No; he shall be called John.”

Luke 1:61 But they said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name.” 62 So they made signs to his father—what he would have him called.

Luke 1:63 And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, “His name is John.” So they all marveled. 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God. 65 Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea. 66 And all those who heard them kept them in their hearts, saying, “What kind of child will this be?” And the hand of the Lord was with him.

Let’s tease this section apart. First of all, as faithful parents, they are not just in covenant with God, but all that they have and are is in covenant with God. This includes their baby. God claims babies for His covenant. He continues to do so. The sign of the covenant in the Old Testament was circumcision. The sign of the covenant in the New Testament is baptism. All the way back to Genesis 17, God commanded the sign of the covenant to be applied to infants on the eighth day and said that those who were not circumcised would be cut off from the covenant and its privileges and protections. The early church understood this connection. That’s why all the way up to AD 253² many in the church appear to have baptized children on the eighth day after birth, regardless of which day of the week it landed on. Thus, Fidus (who was the moderator of a large presbytery) wrote a circular in AD 250 to all the churches in his presbytery saying that baptism should be delayed until the eighth day after a child was born on the analogy of circumcision. Apparently some people preferred to have their child baptized on Sunday. So they were baptizing their infants on day one, three, five (whatever was the Sunday after birth) rather than on the eighth day. And the moderator of presbytery opposed that and said that the law mandated that the sign of the covenant be applied on the eighth day after birth. His opponents argued that Sunday *was* the eighth day in New Covenant terms. And they couldn’t decide it at that presbytery, so they appealed the decision to the General Assembly, and the Council of Carthage met to discuss this issue in AD 253. At that council, it was settled that babies could be baptized on Sunday even if it was earlier or later than the eighth day, and they gave several reasons. They agreed that the eighth day symbolism was pointing to the New Covenant Sabbath. But all of their reasons were consistent with this connection of baptism to circumcision. They did not deny that connection.

I find it significant that there is no evidence that anyone objected to infant baptism at this time in any of the presbyteries of that General Assembly. In fact, almost a hundred years earlier, elders from other presbyteries — like Justyn Martyr, Aristides, and Clement of Alexandria spoke of baptism as an apostolic practice. Church fathers in the second and third centuries equated baptism with circumcision. Irenaeus (who was taught by Polycarp, John’s disciple) applied baptism “to infants and little ones and children and youths and older persons,” and he wrote that in AD 180. That’s pretty early. Origen said, “the church has a tradition from the apostles to give baptism even to infants.” So all over the church you

² Some say AD 251.

see people practicing infant baptism as a replacement of circumcision. Hippolytus said the same in AD 215. The point is, the early church never stopped including children in the covenant, and the first church council at which *any* controversy *at all* was raised over infant baptism was in AD 253, and it was only on which *day* the sign should be applied to the infant. They all believed in infant baptism. Infant baptism was universally practiced; Sunday was treated as equivalent to the eighth day.

Well, the second thing I notice here is that they were planning to name this child when it was circumcised. The father usually named the child, but in this case, the father couldn't talk, so the mother gave the father's previous wishes. When they asked the father if that was so, he wrote on a tablet in verse 63, "His name is John." He named this child. This practice explains why during the first fifteen hundred years of church history, parents named their children at baptism. This was a carry-over from circumcision.

Third, this circumcision did not save John. Luke 1:15 tells us that John was filled with the Holy Spirit long before he was circumcised. It says, "He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb." That is proof positive that circumcision did not save him. John was already saved before he was circumcised and Christ didn't need to be saved when He was circumcised. Don't ever think that circumcision in the Old Testament or baptism in the New Testament saves our children. It's the sign of the covenant. Only Spirit baptism saves, and that can come before, during, or after water baptism.

But fourth, don't ever think that this sign is unimportant. It is a sign *and a seal* of God's grace. When the sign of the covenant was applied to John, Zacharias referred to God's "oath which He swore to our father Abraham" (v. 73). God didn't just give a sign; He gave an oath that He would fulfill what the sign signified. In other words, it was a seal or a pledge that God would fulfill what He promised. That's why Romans 4:11 called circumcision a sign and seal. A seal is a pledge. You see, at the heart of every covenant is God's promise, "I will be a God to you and to your children after you." That's God's covenant oath. When we baptize our children, we take vows to raise our children up in the fear and nurture of God (that's an indispensable part of the covenant according to Genesis 18:19). But God is also making an oath that He will bless our nurture of these children. And if the baby is not already saved, God will honor the parent's faith by saving that child at some point in the future. It's God's oath of the covenant. Take comfort in the fact that baptism is a seal or pledge just like circumcision was.

A fifth thing we see in John's circumcision is given in Luke 1:50, which says, "His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation... as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his children forever." That is dealing with covenant succession. To be part of the covenant was to have God claim your children and your children's children. Since you give all that you are and have to God when you enter the covenant, it makes sense that you would give your children to God. He owns them; He claims them, and then God gives them back as a stewardship trust. In Ezekiel 16 He speaks of "your sons and your daughters, whom you bore to Me," and then calls them "My children" (Ezek. 16:20-21) Yes, they are your sons and daughters in a sense, but they also belong to God. Isaiah 40 says that God not only owns the adult believing sheep who are in His flock, but He also claims their children as part of His flock. Speaking of the New Covenant, it says, "He will feed His flock like a

shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young.” God’s covenant is a *family* covenant. God told Abraham, “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Well, that hasn’t changed. Acts 3:25 quotes that verse and says that it continues to be true today. It says that in Christ, “all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” That’s what baptism signifies. So it is no surprise that Jesus said, “allow the little children to come to Me, and do not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” They are at least outwardly in the kingdom or in His flock. He protects them and cares for them.

Her anticipation of John’s ministry (Luke 1:66-80)

Well, the moment Zacharias agreed that his name was John, his speech was restored by God, and he prophesied. What a joyful moment it would have been to have a speechless husband now prophesying. And the result was that people began to realize that John was going to be something very very special.

Again, I don’t have time to preach on everything in his speech, but this too would have given great joy and confirmation to Elizabeth of God’s plans for John. Let’s read it.

Luke 1:67 Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:

Luke 1:68 “Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited and redeemed His people, 69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of His servant David, 70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, Who have been since the world began, 71 That we should be saved from our enemies And from the hand of all who hate us, 72 To perform the mercy promised to our fathers And to remember His holy covenant, 73 The oath which He swore to our father Abraham: 74 To grant us that we, Being delivered from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without fear, 75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life. 76 “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, 77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins, 78 Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; 79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Luke 1:80 So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.

Jesus pays a tribute to Elizabeth when he describes John the Baptist in these words: “Assuredly I say to you, among those born of women, there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist...” It would have been a huge responsibility to train and raise such an important person. But God had already prepared Elizabeth and Zacharias to be able to do so. And from the results in John’s life we can see that their training was good.

Other applications

We are never too old to serve God

What are some additional applications that can be made from the life of Elizabeth? Well, first, we are never too old to serve God. Zacharias didn’t retire from ministry even though he was very old. I’ve told the officers of this church that they obviously need to remove me

from the pulpit if I start going senile, but if God gives me a good mind and strength of body, I hope I can keep going to 90 and beyond. *Elizabeth* also continued to serve in *her* old age. It's a lot of work to raise a son. Imagine doing it as a 70 year old (or whatever age she was). She might have been older. Sarah was 90 years old when she gave birth to Isaac. But that is a lot of work. And that work is service to God. Just as they had prayed for a son, they no doubt continued to pray. Elizabeth ministered to her husband on many levels, including sexual. She ministered to Mary. We are never too old to serve God. God certainly doesn't put us on a shelf. Some people are so feeble, the most they can do is write letters or pray, but that too is service. While you can certainly retire from a given job, never retire from serving God. That's the first lesson.

Children truly are a gift of God

Second, children truly are a gift from God. It's not just the miracle children like John who are gift, every child is said to be a gift from God and the work of God's creative fashioning. Psalm 127 says, "Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward." They are not a burden or something to be avoided. They are a reward. You know we are living in a godless culture when people either abort babies or abandon babies or don't want to have babies. Babies are a gift from God. Psalm 139 verses 13 and following describe God fashioning each child in the womb. We must be a people who value children as a gift from God.

Our God is a God of miracles

Third, our God is a God of miracles. This was truly a miracle. Theological liberals can't believe in miracles because it doesn't comport with their scientific principles established by secular science - and I use the term "science" loosely because Scripture calls that kind of science, "science falsely so called." But they are imposing external principles upon God. No, God will not be put in a box by liberals. But many conservatives don't believe in miracles either - at least not today. Miracles make them feel uncomfortable. But our God cannot be put into a box. He has never stopped acting on behalf of His people and we continue to experience miracles at God's good pleasure. We can't command miracles, but *He* can.

Our faithfulness, patience, and godly vision can be passed on to a child

Fourth, our faithfulness, patience, and godly vision can be passed on to a child. John was a remarkable person, but he was remarkable in part because His parents were blameless and worked diligently with him. Obviously it is all of God's grace, but God's grace works through means as well - and involved-parents is one of those means. And they must have been just as faithful in serving God by raising John as they had been faithful in serving God before John was born. And that faithfulness paid off. You can pass on a godly vision, patience, and faithfulness to the next generation. There are no guarantees, but it is what we should expect.

We should never “reproach” those who can’t have children

Fifth, we should never reproach those who can’t have children. Chapter 1, verse 25 says that God took away her reproach. The Greek word for reproach, ὀνειδος, means “loss of standing connected with disparaging speech, disgrace, reproach, insult” (BDAG). They may not have said it to her face, but she could feel the loss of standing and that she was a second class citizen in the eyes of some people. We must not reproach those who do not yet have children. Pray for them, yes. But don’t judge. I have had people come to me in tears because they have been trying to have children for years and people assume that because they don’t yet have children that they don’t want to have children. That’s a kind of reproach. Don’t assume and don’t judge.

Though she was richly blessed, you are blessed even more (Matt. 11:11)

The last application I will make is that though Elizabeth was incredibly blessed to be the mother of the forerunner of Jesus and to be the mother of the greatest of Old Testament saints, Jesus says that all of you are greater than her son and are therefore greater than her in some sense - precisely because you are in the time of the kingdom. Earlier I quoted the first half of Matthew 11:11, but let me quote the *whole* verse.

Matt. 11:11 “Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

They looked forward to the kingdom of heaven coming down to earth and invading earth. They longed for that kingdom. Well, brothers and sisters, we live in the time of the kingdom. It is progressively invading earth, winning people, and will one day (according to Acts 3:25) bless all the families of the earth. That’s pretty universal. What a privilege it is to be in this time of the kingdom. Yes there is fighting to possess what rightfully belongs to Jesus, just as there was fighting by Joshua to possess Canaan. But the earth has been given to the saints, and the Great Commission calls us to disciple all nations, teaching them all the Word, trusting that Christ right now has all authority, and that He is with us all the days. Rejoice that you are greater than John the Baptist. And may such rejoicing result in faith to expect great things from God and to attempt great things for Him. Amen.