

Study Notes: Luke 1:5-25

December 8, 2019: “Ordinary People, Extraordinary God: *Too Old? No Way!*”

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In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

- Luke begins his gospel by setting the events that he is about to record into the history of the larger political climate. There were several King Herods in Jewish history, but this specific king was “Herod the Great” who ruled from 37 BC to 4 BC. We are not told exactly when these events took place in the reign of Herod, however, that information isn’t crucial to Luke’s purpose.
- Luke’s story of the fulfillment of God’s plan (see Luke 1:1), begins with two ordinary people, Zechariah (some translations: Zacharias) and Elizabeth. Zechariah’s name means “Yahweh has remembered,” which foreshadows what will happen in this story.
 - Zechariah was a priest, and as such, his role was to serve in the temple. The book of Chronicles records that there were 24 divisions of priests, and Abijah is mentioned as the eighth division (1 Chronicles 24:10). Elizabeth was also from the priestly line of Aaron.
 - Zechariah and Elizabeth were said to be righteous in the sight of God, as they observed all His commandments. The word translated as, “observing,” is the Greek word *poreuō* that literally means “walking in.” The description of Zechariah and Elizabeth as righteous and blameless does not mean they were without sin, but it does mean that they lived their lives for the LORD and carried out His commands with their best efforts. For this reason, since their hearts were right, they were called upright before the LORD (for a similar description, see Genesis 6 and the account of Noah). The New American Commentary notes that Christians can follow the example of Zechariah and Elizabeth by “...keep[ing] God’s commandments and regulations...believe[ing] in and follow[ing] God’s Son and by his grace...observ[ing] the ‘commandments and regulations’ that embody his will.”
 - Though they were living righteous lives, Elizabeth did not have children. The lack of children would have been considered at the time to be a punishment or a curse from God. People would have looked upon Elizabeth with some contempt, and she would have been disgraced (see her comment in vs. 25). However, God opening wombs of those who were barren was a prevalent occurrence in Scripture (i.e. Sarah, Rebekah, Hannah, etc.), so this reveals to readers that God is about to work in the life of Elizabeth!
 - Luke also notes that Elizabeth and Zechariah were very old. This indicated that what was about to happen was not natural, but a miracle from God.

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

- The New American Commentary notes, "Since so many priests served the temple (about eighteen thousand), entering the holy place to clean the altar of incense and to offer fresh incense usually occurred only once in the lifetime of a priest."
 - The lot falling on Zechariah was not considered to be by chance or luck, but considered a special honor and blessing from God. However, it was also an awesome responsibility, that if not carried out correctly could mean dire consequences (see Leviticus 10).
- As the priest went into the holy place to burn incense, everyone at the temple worshipped and prayed for God's favor. They also prayed for the coming of Messiah, the one who would deliver them.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

- Zechariah, already in awesome wonder of what he was called to do, was further startled by seeing an angel in all his brilliance. This was an unusual occurrence, as Zechariah expected to be alone and the people were experiencing a great silence from God. No prophet/messenger had arisen for hundreds of years to speak to the people. Zechariah, like others who saw heavenly messengers, had fear "fall upon him."
- Luke uses the Greek word *deesis* to describe Zechariah's prayer. This Greek word indicates a specific prayer or petition. As a priest, Zechariah would have been praying for redemption for the nation and the coming Messiah. Personally, Zechariah would have been praying for the disgrace to be taken from his wife, a prayer that he likely had prayed for many years. The answer the angel gave was a fulfillment of both prayers; Elizabeth would bear a son.
- The son that Elizabeth would bear would fulfill the prayers by becoming a forerunner of the Messiah, who would cause many to come back to the LORD. The name "John" means "God's grace" or "Yahweh has been gracious." John was to be great in the sight of the LORD, and was to take a partial Nazarite vow abstaining from all forms of drink (see Numbers 6).

- John would help mend relationships. As the NET Bible notes, “These two lines cover all relationships: Turn the hearts of the fathers back to their children points to horizontal relationships, while (turn) the disobedient to the wisdom of the just shows what God gives from above in a vertical manner.”

Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.” The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

- Zechariah questioned the angel, which was a mistake, and was probably asked out of fear or disbelief. As Biblical scholar, Daniel Bennett, points out, “He is allowing his individual experience to have greater weight than God’s revelation.”
- Gabriel was irritated at this request, and reminded Zechariah of who he was talking to. Gabriel was a messenger for God who awaited His call, while standing at God’s throne. Gabriel did grant Zechariah’s request, but he struck Zechariah deaf and dumb. It was an answer to the question, but a difficult thing for Zechariah to live with.
- It has been suggested that Zechariah was struck dumb, because his fear was not being able to explain this message to his wife or the people with the right words.

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

- The people were not used to the priest tarrying in the temple, and began to wonder at this strange occurrence. When Zechariah finally emerged, the people knew something powerful happened to Zechariah in the temple. However, they were not sure what occurred, as he could not speak.

When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

- Just as the angel said, Elizabeth became pregnant and waited in seclusion for some time (she may have been waiting to see if this was an actual pregnancy). When Elizabeth realized she was pregnant, she praised the LORD as the source for her blessing.