

Gospels Bible class 2- the Annunciation of the birth of John Feb. 18, 2012

Today we'll cover the circumstances of what is called the announcing, or the annunciation, of the birth of John the Baptist to the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. This might sound like something of a dry subject, but the story has a number of important lessons for us that we'll talk about as we go through this.

We'll begin the story in **Luke 1:5**, on page 3 of your Harmony of the Gospels.

5 There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea,

So this takes place in the time of **Herod the Great**. This is the Herod the Great that we talked about in one of the background classes, the same Herod who was the great builder and who built the Jerusalem Temple, but also a ruler who was paranoid and brutal. Herod died in the year 4 B.C., and what we'll discuss today takes place in probably 5 B.C., not long before Herod's death.

In mentioning Herod here Luke is saying something that the people of his day would have understood but we have lost sight of. Everyone in that day knew what kind of ruler Herod was. They knew he had **built the Temple**, but they also knew that Herod controlled the priesthood and that it had become increasingly corrupt. Keep in mind also that Jerusalem and Judea were under the control of Rome. And many Jews were prayerfully waiting and hoping for God to intervene and change that sad state of affairs—to restore the kingdom to Israel and also to establish a right spiritual authority in the country.

So it was in this time that there was . . . **a certain priest named Zacharias** [*Zechariah* in Hebrew]. The Bible doesn't tell us anything about the parents of Zechariah. But it is interesting that they chose to name their son Zechariah. Jewish parents in those times gave their children names that were intended to convey the child's destiny—every time the child heard the name, he or she would be reminded of why the parents bestowed that name.

When Zechariah's parents chose that name, it hearkened back almost 500 years to the great prophet and priest by the name of Zechariah who wrote the prophetic book of the Bible that bears his name. And that book talks about the coming of the Messiah and his reign of peace and prosperity and kingship and a proper priesthood and the defeat of Israel's enemies. Did they name their son Zechariah because this is what they wished and hoped for? Quite possibly so.

And what does the name Zechariah mean? In Hebrew it means “remembered by God.” Did they name Zechariah that in hopes that God would remember the plight of His people and intervene to send the promised Messiah? Again, that's quite possible. At the very least, though, this Zechariah would always be reminded of the great priest and prophet Zechariah who was his namesake.

Continuing in verse 5 we see that Zechariah was **of the division of Abijah**.

What is this talking about? Let's look briefly at **1 Chronicles 24** where, near the end of King David's life, he is making preparations for the temple that his son Solomon will build after David's death. He has far too many priests to serve in the temple at once, so David divides them up into 24 groups called “divisions” or “courses,” and they will take turns serving.

3 Then David with Zadok of the sons of Eleazar, and Ahimelech of the sons of Ithamar, divided them [the divisions of the descendants of Aaron who were the priests] according to the schedule of their service ...

5 Thus they were divided by lot, one group as another, for there were officials of the sanctuary and officials of the house of God, from the sons of Eleazar and from the sons of Ithamar ...

7 Now the first lot fell to Jehoiarib, the second to Jedaiah,

8 the third to Harim, the fourth to Seorim,

9 the fifth to Malchijah, the sixth to Mijamin,

10 the seventh to Hakkoz, the eighth to ABIJAH ...

(the remainder of the 24 courses are listed ...)

19 This was the schedule of their service for coming into the house [temple] of the LORD according to their ordinance by the hand of Aaron their father, as the LORD God of Israel had commanded him.

So the way this worked is that there were 24 courses. Each course rotated serving in the temple for one week, and when the 24 weeks were up the cycle started over again. The cycle started immediately after the Feast of Tabernacles. For Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and for Pentecost, and for the Feast of Tabernacles, *all* the priests came and served during those weeks.

The schedule started immediately after the Feast of Tabernacles with the first course, followed by the second course, and so on. At that time the course of Abijah served during the equivalent of early December and mid-June on our calendar. *The Companion Bible* calculates the dates as December 6-12 and June 13-19. For our purposes today we'll just say that these events begin in June of that year, and we'll talk about the chronology of John's birth and Jesus's birth in more detail next time. Let's just say for now that this gives us the starting point for beginning the countdown to Christ's birth around 15 months later in the autumn of the year and not on December 25.

Continuing back in **Luke 1 and verse 5:**

His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth [*Elisheva* in Hebrew].

So here we have Zechariah who is a priest, and he is married to Elisheva who is also a descendant from Aaron, from a priestly family too. *Elishiva*, or *Elizabeth*, means "oath of God." In Elisheva's case, we don't know what the oath was about. Perhaps her parents had made an oath that she would marry a priest and continue their priestly line or something like that. We just don't know.

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

So Luke tells us they were both righteous, that they walked in all the commandments of God, and that they were blameless. That doesn't mean they were perfect—which no human beings are—but it tells us that they loved God and loved His way of life, and they obeyed Him from the heart, not just going through the motions. You might contrast this with a lot of the religious leaders whom we encounter later in the Gospels and whom Jesus called snakes and hypocrites because they were so corrupt in their attitudes and actions. Zechariah stands in stark contrast to them.

So far, so good. And then Luke introduces something that is shocking and the culture of that day. He tells us—

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

In the culture of the day, this just did not compute. Because if you are righteous, obviously you would be blessed with lots of children. What was the first command given to mankind in the Bible? Does anyone remember? It's found in Genesis 1:28, where God says, "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." So if you weren't doing that, you weren't fulfilling God's command and were probably engaged in some kind of secret sin.

In the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth, they had married years before and no doubt expected to bear lots of sons and daughters who would grow up to be part of the priesthood as they were. The first year went by, and no children. The second year passed by—same thing. Then five years. Then 10 years. Then several decades. Now it's obvious that Elizabeth is barren and cannot bear children. That was considered bad enough for anyone, much less a priest and priest's wife. People thought surely one or both of them had disobeyed God and they were being punished for some reason.

But all this time they continue praying for a son or a daughter. They don't give up hope. They wait. And they wait longer. And how do they wait? They wait **"walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly."** It was a severe trial for a priest and his wife to go through all those years, but they didn't let it affect their relationship with God. But finally it reached the point where it was obvious that their childbearing years were over and they were both **"well advanced in years."** Their time for bearing a son to carry on the family line was over.

And that's the background for this key part of the story. There's a lot of information packed into those few verses. Does this remind you of **any other figures** in the Bible? What about **Abraham and Sarah**? What about **Hannah, mother of Samuel**? (1 Samuel 1)

Continuing in **verse 8**—

8 So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division,

9 according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

Let's talk now about the Temple to get a better idea of what is going on here.

The temple was the religious heart of the nation. Here's an illustration of how big it was in comparison with the entire city of Jerusalem in Jesus Christ's day. The temple complex was so huge that it dominated the entire city of Jerusalem.

This gives you some idea of the size of the temple viewed from the front. You can see from the size of the human figures here in front how massive this structure was, made of white stone and trimmed in solid gold.

Here's a picture of what the interior of the temple would have looked like. The large curtain at the back partitioned off the Holy of Holies from this area, which is called the holy place. To the left we see what is typically called in the Bible "the candlestick," which was a huge menorah. To the right we see the table of the showbread on which the

loaves were placed. And in the middle, and front of the curtain partitioning off the holy of holies, was the altar of incense. And this is where Zechariah would carry out the offering of incense. Unlike this illustration, Zechariah would have been totally alone in the Temple when he was carrying out this responsibility.

Zechariah would have been facing the altar of incense and also facing the holy of holies. And here he would offer the incense that represented the prayers of God's people. When he finished praying, he would take a bowl of incense and pour the bowl on the hot coals that were on the incense altar. There was a small hole in the roof, and the people standing outside could see the smoke ascending out the hole in the roof and this gave them a picture of their prayers going up to God. The sweet smell of the incense filled the air. That sweet smell represented to them that their prayers were sweet to God. And we find reference to this in **Revelation 5:8 and 8:3-4**:

Revelation 5:8 Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

Revelation 8:3 Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer *it* with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne.

4 And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand.

All of these either define the incense as the prayers of Gods' people or connect incense with the prayers of God's people.

This was a picture. God uses a lot of physical things—pictures, if you will—to teach us spiritual lessons. For instance, baptism pictures burying the old self in a watery grave and a new life when we come up out of the water of baptism. We lay hands on a person after baptism to convey to them God's Holy Spirit. We laid hands on a person when ordaining them to convey passing on that responsibility in that position being passed to them by God. We anoint people with olive oil which is symbolic of the healing power of God's spirit. Jesus Christ tells us to partake of the symbols of bread and wine at the Passover as symbols of his body and blood sacrificed for us. God tells us to keep his festivals in specific ways at specific times to teach us about his plan of salvation for mankind. All of these are physical things, but they are also spiritual teaching tools like the incense representing the prayers of God's people ascending to Him.

By the time Jesus came on the scene, the number of priests numbered somewhere around 20,000 to 25,000. So the priests served in weekly shifts, about a thousand at a time. If you were a priest, when it was your course's turn to serve, you would all come to Jerusalem. You would all gather at the Temple, and there an elaborate procedure took place, based on choosing by lot, to determine which of the thousand priests would carry out each specific duty. There were four specific duties that were chosen by this method—offering the sacrifice on the altar, washing in the bronze sea, putting the bread on the table of showbread, and offering the incense.

If you do the math, and there are a thousand priests in your course, your odds of getting drawn for one of these four duties is about once every 80 years. So this was so rare that they had a rule that if you were picked once, you couldn't do it a second time until every other priest in your course had had that opportunity. So this meant that most priests did it

only once, and most of the rest never did it at all.

So this year the course of Abijah is serving and they choose the four priests for those daily responsibilities. It comes time to choose the priest for the most honored of those responsibilities, which is offering the incense on the incense altar, and the choice falls on an old man who in all likelihood had never done it before—an old priest by the name of Zechariah.

You have to think about how this old man felt. He'd spent his entire life in the service of God as a priest. Years passed by and he was never chosen. *Decades* passed by and he was never chosen. By this point, considering his age, he was no doubt wondering if he would *ever* be chosen for this honor and responsibility. And meanwhile, he hears all the whispers about himself and his wife and how God must be punishing them for something they have done. This goes on for years. And now, in his old age, by God's grace, *he has finally been chosen*.

The people gathered outside the temple to pray at the time of the offering of the incense, which took place at the time of the morning and afternoon sacrifices. So Zechariah takes the bowl of incense and he goes into the Temple to offer the incense representing the prayers of God's people. This has to be the highlight of his lifetime as a priest. He slowly and reverently approaches the altar in front of the holy of holies. He is all alone, separated by only a few yards and a heavy curtain from the Holy of Holies, the presence of God. And with hands perhaps trembling a little with age he holds the bowl before the incense altar and begins the prayer that was offered at this time.

What did he pray? Did he pray for a son one last time, thinking this was as close to God's presence as he would ever be? We don't know. But we do know from Jewish tradition in the Mishnah the prayer that was supposed to be offered in the offering of incense. We can't say for 100% that this is word-for-word correct, but considering how meticulously they recorded everything, I suspect that it is or that it's at least very close.

So picture Zechariah, this elderly priest, standing before the incense altar and praying. And in his prayer to God is a line that goes like this: **"Send us the one who will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord."** And as this elderly priest prays before the altar of incense, he becomes aware of another presence in the room where he is supposed to be all alone. And he realizes that he is *not* alone—an angel is there with him.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

12 And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

To be blunt, Zechariah was scared stiff. We see this from the angel's first words to him:

13 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.

Here is a *profound* answer to prayer. The angel's message is a direct response to the prayer of Zechariah that God would send the one who would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

The angel tells Zechariah that he is to name his son John—*Jochanon* in Hebrew, meaning "God is a gracious giver." Think about that. The angel tells Zechariah that God is about to give Zechariah the gift he was waited for throughout the decades of his adult life, and

tells Zechariah to name his son, “God is a gracious giver.” So every time Zechariah says his son’s name, Zechariah will be reminded that “God is a gracious giver.” And every time John—*Jochanon*—hears his name pronounced, he will also be reminded that “God is a gracious giver” and that his birth is the result of a miracle from God.

Now I don't know how that strikes you. To me it is incredibly powerful! When we look at the context, God is using a system and timing that had been set up about 1,500 to 1,000 years earlier to make *this particular announcement to this particular elderly priest* about the coming of the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah. It shows that we worship not a God of chance, but a God of precision and planning and perfection in everything He does. And He is a God who is always faithful. He is *the God who remembers what He promises*.

Continuing with the story, the angel says:

14 “And you [Zechariah] 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. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.

So this promised son would have a special mission. He would be great in God's sight, and he would possess God’s Holy Spirit from birth. This is not saying he would be conceived in the same way as Jesus, but it would be miraculous and he would have God’s Holy Spirit, as it tells us here, from his mother’s womb.

16 “And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

In other words, he was going to be a witness for Jesus Christ as the one who would come before Him.

17 “He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah,

You might want to write down **Matthew 17:11-13**, which says:

11 Jesus answered and said to them [the disciples], “Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things.

12 “But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands.”

13 Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist.

And also **Malachi 3:1:**

1 “Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts.

And **Malachi 4:5-6:**

5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet the before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.

6 And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.”

So John the Baptist was the one who came ...

‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’

and as it says **continuing in Luke 1:17**,

and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

John would prepare the way for Jesus the Messiah by telling people that One greater than he was going to come and urging them to repent and be ready.

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.”

Zechariah understandably blurts out the first thing that comes to his mind: “I appreciate that, but I’m an old man and have you looked at Elisheva lately? She’s like, 60 years old? (Or whatever number you would put in there between 60 and 80.) So how can we have a son?”

Obviously he shouldn't have said that.

19 And the angel answered and said to him, “I am Gabriel,

That certainly got Zachariah’s attention. He obviously knew who the angel Gabriel was. There were three archangels. What were the names of these three archangels? Gabriel, Michael, and Hillel or Lucifer. What was the role of Gabriel? He is the archangel who is the message bringer. He’s the one who reveals God’s word about the future, as we see from the book of Daniel where he appears to Daniel. There clearly is a spirit world out there, another dimension you might say, and sometimes these beings known as angels cross over from that world into ours. So the angel says . . .

“I am Gabriel [meaning “warrior of God” or “man of God”], 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.”

I’ll add here that the word “mute” can mean either “mute” or “deaf” or perhaps both, depending on the context, and Zechariah is apparently made deaf as well, because verse 62 says that people made signs to Zechariah asking what he would name his son. They wouldn’t have made signs unless he couldn’t hear and understand what they were saying.

62 So they made signs to his father—what he would have him called.

This may sound pretty harsh for Zechariah to be made deaf and mute for not believing Gabriel's message. But is it? Let's think this through. Zechariah has just been told that he's going to have a son in his old age. And not just any son—his son is going to be the one who will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. A miracle about to take place—Zechariah and Elizabeth are going to have a son in their old age. And the angel Gabriel wants to leave no doubt that he is giving Zechariah a divine message from God. So another miracle is going to take place beginning that very moment—Zechariah is going to be deaf and mute until his son is born.

Is that such a bad thing? Think about it. Zachariah in nine months is going to be the father of the one who will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. If an angel appeared to you and told you that, what would be your reaction? You would probably be in a daze for the next nine months. Initially you’d probably be thrilled, but then the realization would hit you that you’re going to be the father of the one who will prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah! You're going to need months to mentally prepare yourself for that and to answer all the questions racing through your mind, such as “how do I rear this boy?” “How do I teach and train him?” If this happened to you or me, we

would probably appreciate the isolation to think and meditate and reflect and focus on these things. So being deaf and mute for nine months is probably nowhere near as bad as it sounds here.

Meanwhile, outside the Temple the people are wondering what's taking Zechariah so long.

21 And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple.

They've never seen someone take so long to do the incense offering, and they're wondering what's going on.

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.

So he was unable to speak, but he was gesturing to convey to them what had happened.

23 And so it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house.

So after that week had ended, the priests of the course of Abijah, including Zechariah, returned to their homes.

24 Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying,

25 "Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

So this woman who has been looked down on for so long, who has been whispered about, who people were sure must have been punished by God, is vindicated. She is to give birth to one foretold in several ancient prophecies. She is now considered honorable, one whose son would become a great prophet carrying on the prophetic condition of his father Zechariah in an astounding way.

Why did Elizabeth hide herself away 5 months? It doesn't say. Perhaps, considering her age, she simply didn't want to risk losing the baby so she isolated herself. Or maybe she was just overwhelmed by everything that had taken place, and like Zechariah she could use the time to be by herself and process what they had been told—that they would have a son who would be the one to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus the Messiah.

This is a remarkable story of Elizabeth and Zechariah, the one whom God remembered.

Any questions?

Next time we'll continue with another amazing announcement from an angel, the announcement to Mary that she would give birth to the Son of God!