

Today we'll be talking about the birth and childhood of John the Baptist and the appearance of the angel to Joseph, who would be the stepfather of Jesus.

By way of review, remember that Zechariah was a priest, quite old, and he and his wife Elizabeth had been unable to have children for many years. And in that culture and day, being unable to have children meant that God was cursing you for some reason. People would think that there must have been some kind of secret sin involved for God to curse them that way. And for a priest and his wife to not bear children— well, that was viewed as very bad. Obviously they must have done something very wrong to be unable to have children to carry on the priestly line.

**But then, when Zechariah is serving his course** in the Temple, he is chosen to offer incense, which was a great honor. And then, as he is offering incense in the holy place, the Angel Gabriel appears to him and tells him that he will have a son who is to be named John. So sure enough, he returns to his home and his wife Elizabeth conceives. And now we pick up the story in **Luke 1:57**, where Elizabeth is about to give birth to her son John, *Yochanon*, a name that means “God is a gracious giver.”

#### **Luke 1:57-80**

**57 Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son.** So this elderly lady Elizabeth, who had borne the disgrace of barrenness and whispering and rumors for so long, as we talked about two classes ago, finally was blessed with a son in her old age.

**58 When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her.**

Now she was no longer whispered about because of her barrenness, but instead she was honored and respected, because it was clear that God was involved in the promise that she and Zechariah would have a son in their old age, and her pregnancy and the birth of her son were proof that they were favored by God and not cursed. People now realized that God was using Zechariah and Elizabeth in a special way.

**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.”**

We see from this two things—that a child was named on the eight day, the day of circumcision, and also that it was very common at the time for children to be named after a relative. As a side note, it must have been common for priests to name their sons after themselves, because there was an expectation that Zechariah would name his son Zechariah also. But Elizabeth is careful to follow the instructions of the angel Gabriel, and she says the boy's name is to be John.

**61 But they said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name.”**

Again, here's the custom of naming a child after a relative.

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

As we talked about earlier, Zechariah apparently not only cannot speak, but apparently he cannot hear either, because they have to make signs to him. They wouldn't need to make signs unless Zechariah couldn't hear. So they make signs to ask Zechariah what he wants to name the boy.

**63 And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, “His name is John.” So they all marveled.**

This writing tablet that’s mentioned, to give you a little historical and archaeological tidbit, **the Romans used wooden writing tablets** that were covered with wax. You would write in the wax with a stylus, a pointed stick, and when you wanted to erase it you would just smooth out the wax and write on it again. So that was kind of the iPad of the day, and Zechariah is probably using a wax writing tablet or something like that. This also shows that people could commonly read and write and are not a bunch of illiterate peasants.

And as soon as this happens, we read in verse 64—

**64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God.**

So as the angel Gabriel promised, now that the nine months had passed and John was born, Zechariah could speak and hear again. And what is the first thing that comes out of Zechariah’s mouth? As it says here, *praise to God*.

**65 Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea.**

Probably not fear as we would think of it, meaning terror or dread, but rather *awe and amazement* that they had been witness to these miracles—the miracle of Zechariah and Elizabeth having a son in their old age, and the miracle of Zechariah being deaf and mute for nine months and now suddenly and miraculously having his speech and hearing restored.

**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.**

Again, they are clearly talking about these miracles that they have witnessed. No doubt they have heard about how the angel appeared to Zechariah and told him that his son would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. So this is all very exciting to the people of this area. This is big news.

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

**68 “Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people,** So Zechariah starts off praising God, saying *“Blessed is the Lord God of Israel.”* Then he says that God has *“visited His people.”* It had been a long dry spell since God had last sent the prophet Malachi centuries earlier. Centuries had passed with no prophets and no miracles. But now that was changing.

God had directly intervened with Zechariah and Elizabeth, and now they were parents of the one who would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. And Elizabeth’s relative Miriam or Mary had been told that she would give birth to the Messiah. So God had directly visited His people to give these two miraculous births, and now many more prophecies would begin to be fulfilled. So God was clearly working among His people again after a long absence.

Zechariah also says that God has *“redeemed His people.”* To redeem means *to buy back, to ransom or to deliver*. How does God buy back, ransom or deliver us? He does it *through Jesus Christ*. We know that all have sinned, as Romans 3:23 tells us, so we have all earned the death penalty. And apparently Zechariah has some understanding that part of the role of the Messiah would be to be a sacrificial offering on our behalf so that God could redeem His people and save them from their sins. This wasn’t commonly understood about the Messiah.

Continuing in verse 69—

**69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David,**

This is a reference to **Psalm 18:2**, a Psalm of David—

**Psalm 18:2 The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; My God, my strength, in whom I will trust; My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.** “Horn” is used in the Hebrew Scriptures to represent strength or power. You might think of the horns of a bull or an ox. These were very powerful animals and their horns were viewed as symbolic of their power and strength. So what this is saying in shorthand is that God is going to raise up a strong and powerful individual from the house of David who will bring salvation. And of course, that person would be Jesus the Messiah, whose name means “God saves.” And as we have seen mentioned many times in the gospels already, Jesus was from the house of David and would fulfill the many messianic prophecies about a descendent of David.

Continuing in verse 70—

**70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, who have been since the world began,**

God has revealed prophecy or sent prophets all the way back to Adam and Eve bringing the message of a deliverer. We see this prophecy right after Adam and Eve had sinned by taking of the forbidden fruit—

**Genesis 3:14-15 So the LORD God said to the serpent: “Because you have done this . . . I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.”**

And the righteous Enoch, seven generations later, prophesied of the Messiah’s coming to earth—

**Jude 14-15**

**14 Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men also, saying, “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints,**

**15 “to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.”**

And of course, there are hundreds of prophecies of the Messiah and what the Messiah would do scattered throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Why did God send human messengers instead of speaking to people directly? Do you remember what happened at Mount Sinai?

**Exodus 20:18-19**

**18 Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off.**

**19 Then they said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.”**

God wanted to speak to the people directly, but they didn’t want that. They were afraid and wanted an intermediary. So God told them that He would speak to them through human beings, and that’s the way He has chosen to communicate ever since.

Continuing in verse 71—

**71 That we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us,**

Zechariah is here quoting or paraphrasing from **Psalm 106:10**—

**Psalm 106:10** He saved them from the hand of him who hated them, and redeemed them from the hand of the enemy.

And again this isn't an exact quote because the Psalm was written in Hebrew, Zechariah is quoting it in Hebrew or Aramaic, and it's recorded in Greek and then retranslated into English for us, so there are going to be some differences in the wording. And the point Zechariah is making is that God does deliver His people from their enemies, from those who hate them. What two great enemies do we have that God delivers us from?

**1 Peter 5:8** Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

**1 Corinthians 15:26** The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.

So God does deliver us from these 2 great enemies. He protects us from Satan the devil who wants to destroy and devour us, and he destroys what he calls "the last enemy," death, through the resurrection of the dead. So we don't need to fear either of those.

Another Scripture you might want to write down is Hebrews 13:6—

**Hebrews 13:6** So we may boldly say: "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

So long as we are obeying God is doing what He says is right, we don't need to fear any human beings for what they might do to us.

Continuing in verse 72—

**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:**

We see here the Zechariah understood that the coming of the Messiah would involve several important things. It would involve *mercy*—forgiveness of our sins and reconciliation to the father. It would involve *God's holy covenant* with human beings. It didn't mean scrapping God's law and ignoring it, but rather it would involve writing that law in our hearts and minds. And it would involve the *promises made to Abraham*, that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed—a prophecy of Jesus the Messiah being a descendent of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Judah. Zechariah was obviously familiar with these prophecies and promises and understood how the Messiah would fulfill them.

Continuing in verse 74—

**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.**

How do we serve God without fear? By serving him in holiness and righteousness all the days of our life. We serve God according to *His* definitions of holiness and righteousness, and not making up our own ways to worship Him. And of course, the true way we serve God in holiness and righteousness is through Jesus Christ living again within us through God's Holy Spirit.

Continuing in verse 76, Zechariah shifts to prophesying specifically about his son John—

**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,**

Zechariah understood that the prophecy of Malachi 3 and verse 1 related specifically to his newborn son John.

**Malachi 3:1**

**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.**

So Zechariah, prophesying by God’s Spirit, knew that this prophecy in Malachi was about his son, who would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord as a prophet of the most high God. That had to be quite a profound moment for Zechariah to prophesy this of his own son, this tiny eight-day-old baby.

Continuing in verse 77—

**77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins,**

John’s message, as we’ll see later, was primarily a message of repentance. He did not teach about salvation himself, but rather pointed people to the coming Messiah, through whom would come salvation and forgiveness of sins.

**78 Through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;**

And of course, all of this is possible through the mercy and grace of God, and not anything that we deserve.

Will comment briefly about the word “Dayspring” here. The original Greek is basically a word referring to the sun rising in the East at dawn. And it’s also a reference to another prophecy of the Messiah in **Malachi 4:2**, which says—

**Malachi 4:2 But to you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings.**

This is metaphorically speaking of Jesus Christ as the sun dawning or arising at daybreak and bringing light and healing to the world. That’s what this phrase in Luke 1:78 is referring to. Jesus Christ is the one who brings light to the world. And we see this metaphor continued in the next verse, Luke 1:79—

**79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”**

As we talked about in the sermon on the background of the four Gospels, one of the themes that we see in them is the theme of *light versus darkness*. And that darkness is not just an absence of light, but rather is the *force and power of darkness*, referring to the demonic world that has blinded humanity in a shroud of blindness and death. Here in this verse we see the connection between darkness and spiritual blindness or deception and the death that results from it, because Satan has deceived the whole world. Jesus Christ came as the light to lift the veil of darkness and to destroy death. How? By what it says here—by “guiding our feet into the way of peace.”

And we know that it is not within man to direct his own steps or to know the way of peace without having that divinely revealed to us.

Wrapping up this portion about John the Baptist in verse 80, it concludes—

**80 So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation [or appearance] to Israel.**

We don’t see much at all in the Gospels about the childhood of Jesus or John the Baptist. We have this one sentence about John, and one incident about Jesus when He is age 12.

However, I don’t think it’s much of a stretch to say that John likely stayed with his elderly parents Zechariah and Elizabeth until they passed away, and after that he probably went out into the deserts of Judea to prepare for and begin his prophetic mission.

Now we'll move to the next section of the harmony at the bottom of page 5 and cover these eight verses fairly quickly. This is where an angel appears to Joseph and tells Joseph about the son who will be born to Mary. So continuing the story in Matthew 1:18—

**Matthew 1:18-25**

**18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.**

We talked about the betrothal period last time. When a couple were engaged, that was legally considered as though they were married, even though the marriage had not been consummated. This engagement period typically lasted about a year while both the man and the woman prepared for what would be their life together.

Now put yourself in Joseph's sandals. They are engaged when suddenly Mary goes away to visit her relative Elizabeth for three months. And either while Mary is away with Elizabeth or after Mary returns from visiting Elizabeth, Joseph finds out that Mary is expecting a baby. To Joseph, this has to look pretty bad. Either she was pregnant and ran off to stay with Elizabeth while she figured out what to do, or when she went off to visit her relative Elizabeth she was obviously doing some other kind of visiting with somebody else at the same time. So to Joseph, this did not look good either way. He was wrestling with whether he would break the marriage agreement. Continuing in verse 19—

**19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.**

So Joseph was a good and righteous man who apparently truly did love Mary and who didn't want to see her publicly disgraced. So he would just quietly divorce her and be done with it. Or so he thought.

**20 But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.**

**21 "And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins."**

So Joseph is given essentially the same message that the angel Gabriel had given to Mary sometime earlier. Mary would have a son, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and the son's name would be Yeshua—"God saves"—for He would save His people from their sins.

And then Matthew, who as we covered in the background to Matthew was writing to a Hebrew audience to show that Jesus truly was the Messiah who fulfilled so many messianic prophecies, adds a note showing that this was a fulfillment of one of those prophecies.

**22 So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying:**

**23 "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."**

This is quoted from **Isaiah 7:14**—

**Isaiah 7:14 Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.**

And this is what *Immanuel* means—"God with us."

You might write down **John 1:1-18**, which says: **"In the beginning was the word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt**

**among us.”** We covered this portion of John in a sermon two months ago, and John’s whole point in introducing his Gospel this way is to show that Jesus preexisted as God before He came to earth, and that He indeed was “God with us” during the period of His lifetime on earth. Jesus was God living on the earth in human form during that time. As Philippians 2 talks about, he loved us so much that he surrendered his divinity— his power and glory and majesty as God—and came to earth to live and to die as a physical human being.

**24 Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife,**

**25 and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS.**

One thing to note here about Joseph is that there was no arguing or debate. He didn’t need a miracle to convince him like Zechariah. He just simply did it. He was told that Mary was expecting a child by the Holy Spirit, and he fully accepted that.

Another factor that may have played into his reaction is that he probably genuinely loved Mary, and he was relieved to hear this explanation from the angel. He probably thought she was an honorable woman who would not have been unfaithful to him, and now it all made sense and he did not hesitate to take her as his wife.

I’ll go ahead and point out here that Joseph and Mary did have other sons and daughters after this. Two other passages and Matthew confirm this. The first is **Matthew 12:46-50**—  
**Matthew 12:46-47**

**46 While He was still talking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brothers stood outside, seeking to speak with Him.—**

**47 Then one said to Him, “Look, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with You.”**

And another passage that is even more specific and names his brothers is **Matthew 13:54-56**—

**Matthew 13:54-56**

**54 And when He had come to His own country, He taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, “Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works?**

**55 Is this not the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas?**

In Hebrew the names would’ve been Yaakov or Jacob, Yusef or Joseph, Shimon or Simeon and Y’hudah or Judah—all good Jewish names—two named after some of the patriarchs and two named after two of the 12 sons of Jacob. And two of these half-brothers—James or Jacob, and Judah or Jude—would later write the epistles of James and Jude.

**56 “And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this Man get all these things?”**

So here we see that Jesus had at least four half- brothers, and since it mentions sisters— plural—He had at least two. And I point this out because, as we mentioned last time, the position of the Catholic church is that Mary was a perpetual virgin even after she gave birth to Jesus. In the Gospels clearly disproved this. The way they get around this passage is to say that this was referring to cousins rather than brothers and sisters, or alternatively, that these were children of Joseph’s who was a widower before he married Mary, and thus these were Joseph’s children and not children born to Mary. But if you read the plain meaning of these passages it’s clear that’s not what is being talked about here. In the Catholic church, tradition

is more important than Scripture, so they have to distort the plain meaning to come up with convoluted explanations for their beliefs. And of course, all of this emphasis on Mary and worship of Mary is nothing more than a continuation of the worship of the Babylonian Semiramis, the Queen of Heaven—which is one of the titles the Catholics give to Mary. But that’s a whole other subject we don’t have time for today.

Any questions?

We are now dismissed.

### **Did Isaiah prophesy a virgin birth?**

Matthew’s first citation of prophecy in 1:23 comes from Isaiah 7:14: “Behold, a virgin will conceive and bear a son, and will call his name Emmanuel.” Isaiah is clearly making a predictive prophecy, but some people argue that Isaiah isn’t talking about Jesus at all. Are they right?

In the context of the Isaiah passage, Rezin and Pekah, the kings of Syria and Israel, form an alliance against the Assyrian empire, but together they aren’t strong enough to withstand an Assyrian invasion. So they invite Ahaz, king of Judah, to join their alliance. When Ahaz refuses, Rezin and Pekah conspire to overthrow Ahaz, and to replace Ahaz with a king more favorable to them. Ahaz was terrified of them, and planned to appeal to Assyria.

Overthrowing Ahaz would have far wider repercussions, because it would mean the extinction of the Davidic dynasty, through which the Messiah would come. So God sent Isaiah, with his young son Shear-Jashub, to Ahaz with a message not to be afraid; God would protect them. As a sign that God would not let Syria and Israel overthrow Judah, God invited Ahaz to ask for a sign—anything, as an assurance. Ahaz, with false devoutness, claimed that he did not want to test the Lord. But really, he didn’t want any sign to come true, meaning he would have to abandon his plans to appeal to Assyria (a cruel and idolatrous nation, cf. the book of Jonah). Isaiah’s angry reply makes it clear that Ahaz isn’t answering with true piety.

This is the context for the Emmanuel prediction:

And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. The LORD will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father’s house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria."

Matthew specifically applies verse 14 to Jesus. Indeed, if we take ‘almah to mean virgin (as is the most likely translation), there is no other virgin birth that could be cited. Very strong support comes from the Septuagint Greek translation of c. 250 BC, which used the word *parthenos* (παρθένος), from which we derive the word parthenogenesis.

But how is a virgin birth 700 years after Ahaz’s time in any way a sign that the conspiracy is doomed to failure? The emphasis certainly seems to be on something happening in Ahaz’s day. The answer is that some prophetic passages exhibit *dual reference*,<sup>1</sup> where two



prophecies are mashed together, and it may not be clear initially that more than one subject is being referred to. In this case, verse 14 would be referring to the virgin birth that would take place in the distant future. But then in verse 16, when he says, “before the boy knows enough to reject evil and choose the good,” Isaiah is no longer talking about Emmanuel, but about his son, Shear-Jashub. This probably explains why God instructed Isaiah to bring his son. In other words, before Shear-Jashub reaches an age where he can be held morally accountable, Pekah and Rezin will be destroyed. The fulfillment of this sign would be confirmation that the prediction about the virgin birth—the sign to the whole house of David—is similarly trustworthy.

Some would argue that it is artificial to see two prophecies, one with a distant fulfillment. But if one takes the whole of this section of Isaiah into account (from the holy seed of the burned stump at the end of Chapter 6, to the glorious Prince of Peace passage in Chapter 9), it would seem that Isaiah sees Emmanuel coming only after the nation has been destroyed. Furthermore, the original languages differentiate between the two: the prophecies directed to Ahaz alone has a singular second person, and those directed to the House of David have a plural second person. In most dialects of English today, there is no distinction, but this is just the normal devolution of language.