

The Forerunner Foretold

Luke 1:5-25 on November 10, 2024

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Please read Luke 1:5-25 before going further in this transcript.

Today's text begins by introducing 2 particular people: a married Jewish couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth. Luke 1:5 says, "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."¹ So Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in real, human history during the time of King Herod's reign. And God chose this particular time in history, to reveal through this particular couple that an important step in His Master Plan of Redemption was about to unfold.² In fact, a good number of the predictions and promises that God had made to His people back in the Old Testament, were now right on the brink of being fulfilled.

Luke's historical account of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and their son, John the Baptist, flows right out the opening words of His Gospel, which we talked about last Sunday. Today's account, had been handed down to Luke by faithful eyewitnesses, whose information Luke then carefully investigated before reporting it to us. And as Luke officially begins his orderly account, under the inspiration of the Spirit, he determines that the best place to begin his Gospel account, is by sharing the faith story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were two ordinary, everyday believers, who lived out godly lives of simple obedience and trust.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were chosen by God to have a son: a son named John the Baptist who would not only be an answer to their lifelong prayers for a child, but who would also turn out to be the forerunner of the Lord Jesus Christ. A forerunner is simply someone who goes out before the person coming after them. So we could picture someone taking a test run through the course for the Bemidji Blue Ox marathon, just to check everything out before the official racers compete. This person is intentionally sent in advance, to clear the course of any obstacles and to prepare the people along the trail for what's about to come next.³

But here's the thing, WHY? Why does Luke spend time writing about the forerunner? And why so much backstory about the forerunner's parents? Why not just jump right to the main event and tell us about Jesus? Here's why: because a forerunner was foretold in the Old Testament. In the words

¹ See 1 Chronicles 23:32 and 24:10.

² Consider Galatians 4:4.

³ "one that precedes and indicates the approach of another: such as... a skier who runs the course before the start of a race." <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/forerunner>

of verse 17, “And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” You see, it’s always been God’s plan to send a forerunner to prepare the way for His one and only Son to come to this earth. So Luke begins his Gospel account with the faith story of John’s parents, which is a significant part of his origin story. God is now giving His people a clear indication that He’s moving forward with His next step in salvation history. Whatever God says He will do, He does! Every single prediction and promise from the Old Testament will be fulfilled! You can count on it!

John’s parents are described this way in Luke 1:6-7, “Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. 7 But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.” We’re not told how long they were married, but it had likely been for a long time, because in that culture they would have likely gotten married quite young, and they were now both very old. Throughout their entire marriage, they’d been childless, but not for lack of righteousness. Verse 6 highlights that “both of them were righteous in the sight of God.” This doesn’t mean that they were somehow perfectly sinless; it simply means that their reverence for God was sincere, and that they were devoted to serving Him faithfully. They were righteous, and they were childless. In other words, their inability to have children had nothing to do with a lack of faith, or a lack of obedience to God.

Sadly, if we jump ahead to verse 25, we learn that through all these many years of infertility, Elizabeth had felt a sense of shame about being childless, a sense of disgrace among her own people. Now, some of this was cultural, because having children was considered an incredibly high honor among the Jews of her day. Children were rightly viewed as a precious gift from God. But, back then, when someone didn’t have children, many people wrongly viewed this as an automatic sign that something was wrong with their faith.⁴ In fact, some of us still do this today: we unfairly assume that the reason someone’s life isn’t going the way we think it should, must be because of some sin in their life. And while this can occasionally be the case, to automatically jump to this conclusion, is both theologically wrong, and mean. It’s so unfortunate that we have this tendency as humans to jump to conclusions, and to apply bad theology to other people’s already challenging circumstances. Rather than making their pain worse, and increasing their suffering, we need to empathize with other people, and try to lighten their load through loving prayer and compassion.⁵

⁴ That’s not to say this is *never* the case, but we shouldn’t automatically assume it’s *always* the case.

⁵ Here’s a helpful article: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/god-of-the-womb/>

I read something this week in Darrell Bock's *NIV Application Commentary* that really caught my attention: "God never guarantees that life will come without pain and disappointment. The central issue is how we handle it. ... Trust and dependence will cause us to find fulfillment in ways we would not even have considered otherwise."⁶ You see, the reality is, that even when we're sincerely trying to live according to God's ways, things don't always go the way we think they should. This can be frustrating, and disheartening, because it feels like God isn't hearing our prayers. The way forward in these kinds of situations, is exemplified by the godly example of Zechariah and Elizabeth: keep trusting and obeying. Their example would have been particularly relevant to God's people living early in the 1st century because at that time the Jewish people were experiencing what scholars call the "400 Silent years." This refers to the time between the Old and New Testaments, when God seemed to go silent, because He wasn't sending any new prophets, or giving any new books of the Bible. So when Zechariah and Elizabeth's neighbors heard their story, and learned about their godly testimony of trusting and obeying God even when He seemed silent, it would have encouraged them to do the same. And then, later on in history, when many of them read their story in Luke's account, after all of the events of his Gospel had been fulfilled, it would have reminded them once again, to keep trusting and obeying, and to keep waiting for God's perfect will to be accomplished in other things as well.⁷

And so, putting all of this together, we discover that the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, is a microcosm of a much grander story. We see God answering the prayers, not just of this one couple, but of the entire Nation of Israel. God's people had been longing for centuries for their Messiah to come, aching for it. And in the testimony of John the Baptist's parents, we find the story of "The Forerunner Foretold," the story of the long-awaited forerunner of Jesus Christ.

Luke 1:8 and following, goes on to tell us about Zechariah's incredible encounter with an angel.⁸ Verse 9 tells us "he [Zechariah] was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense."⁹ The altar of incense was located right in front of the curtain that shielded the Ark of the Covenant, which was known as the

⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, p. 53.

⁷ Darrell Bock puts it well: "When the time of fulfillment [finally] comes, we realize that his timing was better than ours. ... [And] Sometimes we are deprived of something because God has better things awaiting us down the road." Darrell L. Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, p. 55.

⁸ By the way, there's a great rendition of this in the movie, "Nativity Story," which I highly recommend watching some time. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsYtVb4fvcU>

⁹ God was clearly up to something on this particular day because this was more than just a happy coincidence. After all, Zechariah was one of some 18,000 priests, and with that many priests, some of the priests probably never even got this opportunity. Darrell L. Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, p. 48.

place of God's presence among His people.¹⁰ This is what made it such a special honor and privilege to be chosen for this duty.¹¹ ¹² In the Old Testament God commanded His people to continually burn incense before Him, both morning and evening. This symbolized their worship and prayers being constantly lifted up before the Lord. This not only inspired the people to be faithful in their daily prayers, but it also reminded them that God was always faithfully listening to them.

While everyone else was gathered outside for prayer, Zechariah was praying inside. Verse 11 says, "Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense." To put it mildly, this totally freaked Zechariah out! He was standing directly in front of the altar of incense, close enough to be able to spread the incense over the hot coals, and the angel was right beside it, within arm's length of him. Talk about intense!

Luke 1:13 tells us, "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." Now at this very moment, Zechariah was standing before the Lord as an official priestly representative of God's people, so the prayer he was praying at the altar of incense was likely a corporate prayer on behalf of all of God's people. So it's unlikely that he was working through his own personal prayer list. And yet, the angel indicates that the prayer that has been heard was Zechariah's prayer for a child. So, exactly what's going on here? Well, apparently his private prayers for his wife to bear a child, and his corporate prayer for God's help and blessing for the Israelites, were being answered simultaneously. They overlapped. In the beauty of God's providence, he blessed this godly couple, with an answer to their many long years of asking and waiting, and He ALSO blessed the entire people of God, by answering their many long years of asking and waiting for their Messiah.

So beyond simply announcing Elizabeth's pregnancy, the angel foretells the birth of the forerunner of Christ. Zechariah's prayer has been heard. God wasn't ignoring it all these years, nor had He failed to hear it, but rather He was waiting to answer it, according to His perfect timing, and His perfect plan. Notice how verse 14 says, "He will be a joy and delight to you, and MANY will rejoice because of his birth." So this birth wasn't just for his

¹⁰ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/ark-covenant-and-gods-presence-us>

¹¹ "It was one of the priest's duties to keep incense burning on the altar in front of the Most Holy Place. He supplied it with fresh incense before the morning sacrifice and again after the evening sacrifice (Exodus 30:6-8). Ordinarily a priest would have this privilege very infrequently, and sometimes never, since duty assignments were determined by lot." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1700 footnote on Luke 1:9.

¹² This time, God directed the lot to fall to Zechariah, as part of His perfectly ordained plan to foretell the Forerunner of Christ. See Proverbs 16:33; Acts 1:26; and Jonah 1:7.

parents' joy, it was also intended for the rejoicing of many.¹³ It seems clear that Luke recorded the birth announcements of John and Jesus in close succession, as an intentional way to get his readers to compare and contrast John the Baptist and Jesus. He wants us to reflect on how these two men were similar in some ways, but also markedly different in other ways. They were born in a particular sequence, one to prepare the way, and the other to provide the way. One to call people to repentance, and the other to provide for that repentance, by making a way for us to be forgiven.

Verse 15 says that "...[John] will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born."^{14 15 16} This incredible reality is amazing indeed, and it reveals just how special John's role as the Forerunner would be. He would need supernatural anointing, and empowerment, in order to fulfill God's plan for him.^{17 18} There is so much activity by God's Spirit in both of these birth narratives, and so much joy! Hundreds of years of prayerful waiting, and longing expectation, were now all coming to fruition, as God began to fulfill these Old Testament promises!

Luke 1:16-17 goes on, "He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 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." God is especially concerned about human hearts, and He's faithful to continue sending out His messengers to call people to turn back to Him. "Turning" is a common expression for repentance, which is exactly the ministry for which God is preparing John the Baptist. You see, at this time in Israel's history, they had drifted far from God. This phrase

¹³ In fact, joy is a key idea in Luke's Gospel; it's highlighted in the birth narratives of both John and Jesus, including later on in Luke 2:10 when the angel announces Jesus' birth to the shepherds: "I bring you good news that will cause great *joy* for all the people." See also Luke 1:47,58. Joy even bookends Luke's Gospel at the end of chapter 24 after Jesus' ascension, when His disciples return to Jerusalem with great *joy*!

¹⁴ John's prohibition from alcohol in verse 15 may have been related to a Nazarene vow, or at least to John's sober responsibility of calling people to live holy lives. Consider Leviticus 10:8-11.

¹⁵ "It appears likely that John was to be subject to the Nazirite vow of abstinence from alcoholic drinks (see Numbers 6:2-12) If so, he was a lifelong Nazirite, as were Samson (Judges 13:4-7) and Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11)." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1700 footnote on Luke 1:15.

¹⁶ However, Darrell L. Bock suggests that John likely did NOT take a Nazirite vow since there's no mention of him cutting his hair. Darrell L. Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, p. 49.

¹⁷ There's a particularly fun example of John being filled with the Spirit later on in verse 41, when John leaps for joy in Elizabeth's womb because she hears Mary's greeting. When John leaps, verse 41 says that Elizabeth herself was filled with the Holy Spirit.

As a side note, I'm intrigued by the common connection in the New Testament between being filled with the Holy Spirit, and being drunk with wine. Notice the common connection in Luke 1:15; Acts 2:4,13; and Ephesians 5:18. This makes me say, "hum...."

¹⁸ "Luke's birth narratives stress the activity of the Holy Spirit (see verses 35,41,67; 2:25-27). ...In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit came upon individuals temporarily for some special task, but John was to be filled with the Spirit his entire life." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1700 footnote on Luke 1:15.

stops me in my tracks every time I read it: “to turn the hearts of the parents to their children.” Ufda! How far have we gone astray, if we’ve turned our hearts away from our own children!? Clearly, these folks needed Messiah to come, but before He came, they needed to have their hearts made ready: this was precisely why the ministry of John the Baptist was so necessary: a ministry of calling people to repentance!

Verse 17 compares John’s ministry to that of the Old Testament prophet, Elijah. And there was some confusion in the 1st century about whether or not John the Baptist was the actual Elijah, returning in the flesh, but John himself tells us that he was not.¹⁹ However, verse 17 clarifies that John ministered with the same supernatural empowerment, and he preached a similar message of calling people to return to God.^{20 21}

Regarding this connection to Elijah, it’s worth noting the way it connects to the book of Malachi, which is the very last book of the Old Testament. The final book of the Old Testament before the 400 Silent Years. Malachi 4:5-6 records this prediction: “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children....” John the Baptist was coming in the spirit and power of Elijah, not only as a fulfillment of Malachi’s prediction, but also as a clear signal that God’s master redemptive plan was moving forward. Malachi 3:1 says it this way, “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.” This was predicted and promised some 400 years earlier, which is why God’s people in the 1st century were watching and waiting for the prophet Elijah.²² John the Baptist is “The Forerunner Foretold,” the one who would prepare the way for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Luke 1:18 and following make it clear that this was a lot for Zechariah to take in. So not surprisingly, Zechariah is hesitant to immediately accept the

¹⁹ See John 1:21. Matthew 17:10-13 says, “The disciples asked him, “Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?” Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.” See also Matthew 11:14. Some scholars also suggest that Elijah may be one of the two witnesses in Revelation 11:3.

²⁰ “John was not [*the actual*] Elijah returning in the flesh, but he functioned like that Old Testament preacher of repentance and was therefore a fulfillment of Malachi 4:5-6.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1700 footnote on Luke 1:17.

²¹ Consider Luke 3:7-9. John the Baptist’s ministry will be one of calling people to repentance, and true repentance will spur efforts toward reconciliation between parents and their children (Luke 1:17). *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, pp. 1700-1701 footnote on Luke 1:17.

²² Jesus’ coming will bring both the warning of judgment and the offer of mercy. You see, the book of Malachi has been summarized this way: “The Great King will come not only to judge his people but also to restore them.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1562 introductory notes.

good news that the angel Gabriel had told him. As a result of his unbelief, he will remain *silent* until his son is born, which seems at least a little bit ironic, given the 400 years of silence that led up to this point. Zechariah had waited in prayer for his entire life, and now he just needed to wait for 9 more months. In verse 20, Gabriel makes it clear, "...my words... will come true *at their appointed time*." The *ESV* translates it, "will be *fulfilled in their time*." This connects us back to Luke's Gospel intro in verse 1, "...to draw up an account of *the things that have been fulfilled among us*."

Meanwhile, everyone else is outside the temple wondering what's going on in there!²³ Only later will they learn the particular details, but when Zechariah walked out of the temple, they knew right away that God was up to something.

Luke 1:23-25 concludes, "When his time of service was completed, he returned home. 24 After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. 25 "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."²⁴ ²⁵ The *ESV* translates verse 25, "in the days when he looked on me."²⁶ Elizabeth was seen by God. I love this because it conveys an important truth that each of us needs to know: God sees us. God hasn't overlooked any one of us, He hasn't ignored us, and He hasn't forgotten about us. He is great enough, and kind enough, to pay attention to each and every individual person on the planet.

I also love this because Elizabeth gives God all the credit, and all the glory: "The LORD has done this for me." Once Elizabeth finally receives what her and her husband have been praying for all of their lives, she doesn't forget

²³ The people waiting outside for Zechariah were likely expecting him to give the customary blessing from Numbers 6:24-26, but he could not, because the angel had taken away his speech. Darrell L. Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, p. 50.

²⁴ Compare Elizabeth's experience with Genesis 30:23; 1 Samuel 1:6; and Psalm 113:9.

²⁵ In addition to the sadness that Zechariah and Elizabeth felt over not having children together, they'd also endured years of being looked down on by their peers, many of whom would have assumed the standard cultural belief at the time, that their lack of children was evidence of divine disfavor. See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1701 footnote on Luke 1:25.

²⁶ In the words of Psalm 113:9, "He settles the childless woman in her home as a happy mother of children. Praise the LORD." Also consider Isaiah 54:1-8 which uses the analogy of childbearing to illustrate God's future plans to bless His people.

to give God thanks, not as something He owed her, but as a demonstration of His unmerited favor and grace.^{27 28 29 3031}

Well today we've seen just the beginning stages of God fulfilling His predictions and promises from the Old Testament. And this gives us even greater assurance that He will also fulfill His predictions and promises from the New Testament as well. In other words, God is faithful to fulfill all of the things that He's promised for the past, present, and future. We can count on God to keep His promises!

²⁷ Similar to the miraculous pregnancy of Abraham and Sarah back in the Old Testament, Elizabeth's barren womb will now highlight that God has not forgotten her, nor has he been ignoring her. Consider Genesis 18:10-14; Judges 13; and 1 Samuel 1-2.

²⁸ "God's reversal for one family signifies that he is present to see and deliver his entire people. The grace that Zechariah and Elizabeth receive follow the pattern of God's intervention on behalf of his people." *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2066 footnote on Luke 1:5-25.

²⁹ I appreciate how Darrell Bock summarizes Elizabeth's faith: "Elizabeth pictures the righteous saint who takes her burden to God and rejoices when that burden is lifted. ... God did not owe her this response. Yet Elizabeth does not react as a victim who has been bitter at God for her lack of a child. In fact, she seems to have accepted this fate and served God faithfully anyway. Thus, when the burden is removed, she rejoices as the object of God's personal concern." Darrell L. Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, p. 50.

³⁰ Consider Luke 17:11-19, where only 1 of the 10 lepers returns to thank Jesus for his cleansing.

³¹ When we pray, and when we wait for God's answer, and when we wonder what He's up to, let's remember the words of the Angel Gabriel, "your prayer has been heard." We never need to wonder if God has forgotten about our prayer. We never need to wonder if He will fail to answer. God hears our prayers, and He's working out His answer to those prayers according to His good and perfect will, according to His timetable, and His plan. So, let's keep praying, keep trusting, and keep waiting on the Lord. Although Luke makes no mention of it, it is interesting to note that Zechariah's name means "the Lord has remembered." *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2066 footnote on Luke 1:5.