

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Christmas Series 2016: Infectious Joy (Luke 1:5-80)

This morning we begin our Christmas series of talks. Our first passage is Luke 1:5-80. Don't worry I am not going to do a verse-by-verse commentary! But if you have a Bible to hand it might help to have the passage open in front of you. Our subject is, "Infectious Joy" and the passage starts in Luke 1:5 with the remarkable events surrounding the birth of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist's parents were Zacharias, a priest, and Elizabeth. They were a godly, devoted couple, who were getting on in years and had no children (Luke 1:7). This was a particular sadness to them. Sometimes it is hard to deal with a childless marriage. It can make us sad and also bitter and resentful. I remember when we were first married we always wanted three children and we just assumed this would happen. When it did not happen we went through a very anxious period before our only child was born. We were so pleased God gave us a child and it made us aware of the sorrow couples face when they cannot have children. This morning's passage gives us a sense of the joy Zacharias and Elizabeth experienced.

It was Zacharias' turn to minister in the temple and burn incense (Luke 1:8-10). As he was performing this service the angel called Gabriel appears near the altar of incense (Luke 1:11). Fear is the first experience most people have when confronted by an angel and Zacharias was no exception (Luke 1:12). Gabriel immediately puts the priest at ease by telling him that his prayer was heard (Luke 1:13). Zacharias, it seems, had been praying that Elizabeth would have a child. Given their age he had been praying for something remarkable, which shows us he was a man of faith. Now God had sent Gabriel to tell him his prayer was answered. More than this, the child was going to be a son, he was going to be called John and he was going to be special (Luke 1:13).

It is here will get the first mention of our subject - infectious joy! *"And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth"* (Luke 1:14).

It was not only Zacharias and Elizabeth who were going to be made joyful through the gift of John but also many other people. Gabriel then went on to explain that John would be a great servant of God (Luke 1:15). He explains that John would not drink wine nor strong drink suggesting John was to be a Nazarite (Luke 1:15, see Numbers 6:1-21). More than this, the Holy Spirit would fill the boy from his birth. This extraordinary child would grow up to become John the Baptist and would lead thousands of people to trust in God, confess their sins, and await the coming Messiah. Gabriel explains, in Luke 1:17, John's ministry would have the character of Elijah, the great Old Testament prophet. Gabriel refers to the prophecy in Malachi 4:5-6a. *"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers."*

The key part of John's ministry was, *"to make ready a people prepared for the Lord"* (Luke 1:16). It is at this point the faith of Zacharias falters. In spite of praying for his wife, Elizabeth, to have a child, the appearance of the great angel Gabriel to confirm his prayer was answered, and that his son was to be the person who would herald the coming Messiah, Zacharias asks Gabriel, *"How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years"* (Luke 1:18).

Aren't we just like Zacharias? God puts a real burden on our hearts to pray for something which seems impossible. We pray, sometimes for years, for it to happen. Then God answers and we can't believe it or we doubt its authenticity (see Peter's experience in Acts 12:5-19). Thankfully, God rarely deals with us as he dealt with Zacharias.

Gabriel was not pleased that Zacharias was overcome by doubt instead of being filled with joy. He says, *"I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. 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"* (Luke 1:19-20). The joy of heaven was not yet infectious on earth.

Whilst all this was going on the people outside were beginning to be concerned (Luke 1:21). When Zacharias eventually came out to them he could not speak. Zacharias explained what had happened through improvised sign language (Luke 1:22).

Interestingly, Zacharias completed his temple service before going home (Luke 1:23). Then we are told that Elizabeth conceives. She immediately attributes her pregnancy to God's intervention but instead of spreading the news far and wide she hides herself away. *"And she hid herself five months, saying, 'Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people'"* (Luke 1:24-25).

Elizabeth was a very spiritual woman. Perhaps she remembered the stories of Sarah's conception in old age and birth of Isaac in Genesis 21 and Hannah's faith in God when she was childless and how God gave her a son, Samuel, in 1 Samuel 1. Elizabeth doesn't glory in her pregnancy but quietly retreats into her home for five months. She shows a remarkable submission and humility in regard to what God had done and awaits for Him to reveal His work in His time. This is a little different to what happens in the present.

We seem incapable of keeping anything, no matter how private, from being spread as widely and as quickly as possible. Everyone's business is everybody else's business. At the end of his second letter to the Thessalonians in 2 Thessalonians 3:11-12, Paul describes some Christians as *"busybodies"* and reminds them to work quietly. Discretion is a key quality of Christian behaviour and should govern all our communications including email, Facebook and Twitter.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy the angel Gabriel was sent to Nazareth. This time not to speak to a priest but a young virgin called Mary who was betrothed, or engaged, to a man called Joseph who was an ancestor of David (Luke 1:26-27).

Joy is still very much in the mind of Gabriel when he speaks to Mary, *"Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!"* (Luke 1:28).

God had sown the seed of joy quietly in the heart of Elizabeth and now he sows it in Mary's heart. Mary was, at first, also troubled by the appearance of Gabriel (Luke 1:29). Unlike Zacharias, no mention is made of her prayers. Gabriel simply quells her fear and explains that she will have a son and he was to be called Jesus, which means Saviour (Luke 1:31). Then Gabriel speaks of His greatness, *"He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end"* (Luke 1:32-33).

Mary, however, does have a question, *"How can this be, since I do not know a man?"* (Luke 1:34). This was an intelligent question. In the case of John the Baptist, it was unusual for an older woman to have a child but God had intervened in this way in the past. But a virgin had never had a child before. Gabriel answers Mary's question, *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. 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. For with God nothing will be impossible"* (Luke 1:35-37).

In contrast to Zacharias, who doubted God's ability to answer his prayers, Mary in a simple and almost childlike unquestioning way, accepts God's promise. *"Then Mary said, 'Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.' And the angel departed from her"* (Luke 1:38).

Mary instinctively goes to Judah to see Elizabeth. Hearing Mary's voice her child leaps in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and says, *"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord"* (Luke 1:42-45).

What follows is "The Magnificat" or Mary's Song. It begins with Mary magnifying the Lord and rejoicing in God the Saviour. It has the following themes:

- **The Praise of God** - *"And Mary said: 'My soul magnifies the Lord'"* (Luke 1:46);
- **The Joy of God** - *"And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour"* (Luke 1:47);
- **The Blessing of God** - *"For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed"* (Luke 1:48);
- **The Holiness of God** - *"For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name"* (Luke 1:49);

- **The Mercy of God** - *"And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation"* (Luke 1:50);
- **The Strength of God** - *"He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly"* (Luke 1:51-52);
- **The Kindness of God** - *"He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty"* (Luke 1:53); and
- **The Faithfulness of God** - *"He has helped His servant Israel, In remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever"* (Luke 1:54-55).

Mary stayed with Elizabeth until nearly the end of her pregnancy. These two women must have been a real encouragement to each other. As well as been relatives they were friends. This reference to Mary's three-month visit to Elizabeth emphasizes the value of Christian fellowship and mutual support we need at key times in our lives.

After Mary returned home Elizabeth gave birth her son and her joy was infectious because we read in Luke 1:57-58, *"Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son When her neighbours and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her."*

When I read these verses I think of what Paul wrote in Romans 12:15, *"Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep."*

Joy by its nature is infectious. It is the second characteristic of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22 *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace..."*

Joy is an important feature of the Christian life and demonstrates the deep contentment and delight we have in God who loves us and this infectious joy should overflow into our daily lives.

After John was circumcised on the eighth day, everyone assumed he would be called after his father, Zacharias (Luke 1:59). But Elizabeth insists he is called John (Luke 1:60). This is interesting because the Gabriel had instructed Zacharias that his son would be called John (Luke 1:13). Zacharias must have explained this to his wife. Unable to accept Elizabeth's insistence they make signs to Zacharias to see what he wanted to call his son (Luke 1:62). He writes on a tablet, *"His name is John"* (Luke 1:63). Everyone was surprised but even more surprised when Zacharias immediately began to speak again and, filled with joy, praised God (Luke 1:64).

The whole event made everyone realise God was doing something special through John and they didn't forget the unusual circumstances of his birth, *"Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea. 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"* (Luke 1:65-66).

After experiencing months of dumbness Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied (Luke 1:67-79).

First he praised God for Redemption *"Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited and redeemed His people, And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of His servant David"* (Luke 1:68-69).

He relates this to God's promised Messiah *"As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, Who have been since the world began, That we should be saved from our enemies And from the hand of all who hate us, To perform the mercy promised to our fathers And to remember His, holy covenant"* (Luke 1:70-72).

He traces this back to God's promise to Abraham in Luke 1:73, *"The oath which He swore to our father Abraham"*

These promises were fulfilled to ensure God's people might serve Him. *"To grant us that we, Being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life,"* (Luke 1:74-75).

Then, in Luke 1:76-77, Zacharias identifies his son John as a prophet of God with a special ministry of preparing the way for the Messiah announcing his coming and the need for repentance, *"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, to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins."*

It worth noting that the effect of John's ministry was remarkable. It reached far beyond the land of Israel and affected godly people everywhere (see Acts 18:24-28 and Acts 19:1-7).

In Luke 1:78-79 Zacharias looks beyond the ministry of his own son to the ministry of the Son of God the real source of true joy, *"Through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

The content of Luke 1:78-79 was prophetic. The words of Zacharias, who was once made dumb because of his faltering faith, give us an eloquent and joyous insight into the power of the coming Saviour.

He is described as *"the Dayspring"*, the One who gives light. The Lord declares, *"I am the Light of the World"* (John 8:12);

Zacharias refers to *"the shadow of death"*. The Lord declares, *"I am the Resurrection and the Life"* (John 11:23).

Zacharias closes with a reference to *"the way of Peace."* The Lord Jesus is spoken of as the, *"Prince of Peace"* (Isaiah 9:6) who would make it possible for us to have, *"peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Romans 5:1), *"to know the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding"* (Philippians 4:7) and to know *"the God of Peace"* (Philippians 4:9).

The chapter ends with 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."*

The infectious joy experienced by Zacharias and Elizabeth and those touched by their experience would go into hibernation for around another 30 years. Then, one marvellous day, recorded in John 1:29-34, John the Baptist would announce to the nation of Israel the Saviour of the world. *"The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, "After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me." I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water.' And John bore witness, saying, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.'"*

John had leapt for joy in his mother's womb when Mary had visited Elizabeth. In John 1, John the Baptist's heart leaps for joy that the Saviour of the world was before Him and was about to begin His powerful and joyous work of redemption described in Hebrews 12:2 as, *"the joy that was set before Him."*

Luke records in Luke 2 the joy of heaven and earth at the birth of Jesus Christ. Then in Luke 3:21-22 after Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist, Luke records the joy of someone else - the Father. *"When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened. And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased."*

The Father Himself expresses a delight in His Son as he enters his public ministry (Luke 3:21-22). Jesus goes on, in Luke 15:10, to tell us the joy in heaven over every sinner who repents.

In the very last verse of his Gospel, Luke records that the disciples, *"worshiped Him [Jesus], and returned to Jerusalem with great joy"* (Luke 24:52).

As we approach another Christmas Day it serves as a reminder of the day when Jesus Christ was born as the Saviour of the world. An infectious joy filled the hearts of the few that awaited that momentous day. They looked forward. Today we look back to remember not only the day Jesus Christ was born but also the day He died *"for the joy that was before Him"* (see Hebrews 12:2). We also look back to the joy of His resurrection and ascension into heaven. Now we look up to Him in faith as we seek to joyfully follow and serve Him and we look forward to the joy of His return.

The wonder of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ should fill our hearts with an infectious joy. This joy flows from His love which shed abroad in our hearts in the words of Romans 1:5. May it also flow through us to the world God so loved (see John 3:16).

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