

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Bible Families: Zacharias and Elizabeth

In 1978 a major medical and scientific first was achieved at Oldham District Hospital with the birth of the world's first test tube baby - Louise Brown. Two areas of medical expertise had been brought together, the collecting of eggs, a technique pioneered by Mr. Patrick Steptoe and the technique of fertilisation and early embryo growth outside the body. This was known as In Vitro Fertilisation or IVF for short. The embryos are then transferred back to the mother approximately 48 hours later.

This was another means to aid those who had difficulty in having children, another facility available to medical practitioners to provide help to their patients.

The couple we are considering today, Zacharias and Elizabeth, had a similar problem to that of many couples since time began. They had no children. For Zacharias and Elizabeth there was no IVF or any other medical treatment. I would like to cover this Bible family under the following five headings:

1. Who were Zacharias and Elizabeth?
2. The Angel Gabriel's visit.
3. The Doubt of Zacharias.
4. The Faith of Elizabeth.
5. A Baby called John.

Unless otherwise stated all verse references come from Luke 1.

1. Who were Zacharias and Elizabeth?

In verse 5 we read, "There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth".

As a priest, Zacharias was required to attend to priestly service in the temple. He belonged to the family of Abijah, a descendant of Aaron. We need to look at 1 Chronicles 24:1-19 to understand the history of the division of service amongst the priestly family. Abijah was given the eighth course. A course is thought to be one week long, commencing on the Sabbath or Saturday as we understand today. Zacharias could trace his family back to Abijah and therefore back to Aaron.

Elizabeth was also of the priestly family being able to trace her family back to Aaron. Aaron was the first High Priest appointed by God during the time when Israel journeyed through the wilderness before reaching the promised land of Canaan.

In verse 6 we learn of their standing before God, "They were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless". Here we are told that both Zacharias and Elizabeth were right before God as to their lives. They kept all the commandments and ordinances of God as found in the Old Testament. Their godly lives would be a testimony to others. However, more importantly God declared that their lives were blameless. There was no pretence in their lives. In other words they lived a life which pleased God.

However one thing marred their lives, as we read in verse 7, "But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years." Naturally there was now no possibility of children for two reasons:

- a. Elizabeth was not able to have children and
- b. They were now both old.

For the majority of people, having children and seeing them grow up to adults is something to be cherished. Also the joy of seeing succeeding generations is an additional bonus. However, two thousand years ago there was no IVF or other medical treatment to help bring about the possibility of children.

2. The Angel Gabriel's visit.

It was during one of the occasions when Zacharias was in attendance at the temple that an angel came to him. We read in verses 8 to 10, "So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense."

Zacharias would be alone as he carried out this service for God, the burning of incense upon the altar. This altar was intended to have incense burnt upon it each morning and evening so that a continual sweet fragrance might ascend up before God. This is likened to the prayers of God's people as we have in Psalm 141:2: "Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice". Additionally some expositors of scripture see the altar of incense and the sweet savour ascending to God continually as a picture of the life of the Lord Jesus lived out in this world. We read in the Gospel of Matthew 3:17, "A voice came from heaven, saying, This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased". Every action and word of the Lord Jesus Christ brought delight to the heart of God the Father. The Lord Jesus demonstrated what should have been true of all mankind. But sin had come in and we His creatures did not bring pleasure to God. We continually did only what was not pleasing; even our best endeavours were only as filthy rags.

It would appear that the burning of incense drew crowds of people to pray, knowing that a priest was in the temple at the altar of incense.

This occasion became no ordinary day for Zacharias as we read in verse 11, "Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense". An angel is a messenger from God and appearing on the right side of the altar would indicate a place of authority and power. The authority and power was from God. Angels had from time to time appeared to God's people for a variety of reasons. It may have been a rare event, but it was not unusual. However this did not lessen the impact, as we read in verse 12, "When Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him". However in verse 13 the angel says, "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".

The angel said "your prayer". It would seem from this statement that one thing had dominated the prayer life of Zacharias, and possibly also Elizabeth. How they longed for a child and specifically a son. Now, when both Elizabeth and Zacharias are old, the angel comes with an answer to his prayer. Had Zacharias given up just because he was now old? Not so! Faithful prayer continues even when circumstances naturally say, "It is not possible".

Verses 14 to 17 give us to understand that God's answer is accompanied with additional blessing, responsibility and an outline of the life of the son to be born.

In verse 14, we are told of the joy and gladness which Zacharias would have and that many would rejoice at this birth (see also verse 38 of the same chapter).

Verse 15 brings before us a number of remarkable things concerning John:

- a. "He will be great in the sight of the Lord". This tells us simply that God, knowing before hand, is able to sum up all John's life in such a remarkable way even before he is born.
- b. We are then told of the total commitment and separation to God which would be true of John. "[He] shall drink neither wine nor strong drink". Wine and strong drink might be considered by some to be both the source of joy and of the strength in which to do great things. This was not to be so for John; and
- c. All John's resource, whether joy or strength, would come from heaven. "He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb". There is no greater source of joy and power than that of the person of the Holy Spirit who permanently lives within each believer.

Each member of this family is said to be "filled with the Holy Spirit". John in the above verse, Elizabeth in verse 41 and Zacharias in verse 67. There is no other family mentioned in the scriptures of which this can be said. There are only nine people of whom it is recorded in the Bible that they were "filled with the Holy Spirit".

Verse 16 brings before us what would be John's work. John's preaching would result in many of the nation of Israel being turned to the Lord their God.

We find from verse 17 that John would fulfil the promise made in the book of Malachi 4:5, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD". In Matthew 11:13-14, the Lord Jesus says, "For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to

come". The Lord confirms the greatness of John, the work that he had come to do, and also that John had come in the spirit of Elijah. That great and dreadful day of the Lord is still to come. The period of God's grace has interrupted the flow of events which will eventually bring about the restoration of God's earthly people.

3. The Doubt of Zacharias.

There is no doubt that Zacharias was a faithful man. He served God and kept the commandments, as we have already seen. However maybe because both he and his wife were old, doubts filled his mind and he wanted additional confirmation (see verse 18). We also are sometimes tested as to our faith. We are not always willing to accept what God says in His word. Let us profit from what appears to be a failing in Zacharias and learn that when God tells us things through His word, we should believe both the scriptures and God.

The angel is gracious in that he states his name, that of Gabriel, and that he stands in the presence of God. Not only so, but he was sent to speak to Zacharias and bring these glad tidings (see verse 19). The angel gives Zacharias a sign: he would not be able to speak until everything that Gabriel had said was fulfilled (see verse 20).

The crowd that was outside praying realised that Zacharias was taking longer than usual to complete his task. When he did appear he could not tell them what had happened; he remained speechless. Zacharias was now to remain dumb until the child was born and given the name of John. Not being able to speak would no doubt cause some difficulty but it did not stop Zacharias faithfully completing his service in the Temple. It was not until his work was done that he then returned home (see verses 21 to 23).

4. The Faith of Elizabeth.

In verses 24 and 25 we are told that Elizabeth did conceive and for five months hid herself away. This may well have been to keep herself away from public activity in those early months and to rest as much as possible. Being old it was probably a wise and natural thing to do, even though the hand of God would see His promise through. We are not to live careless lives just because we are saved and know we are going to heaven. God expects us to live wisely so that everything about our lives commends to others both our God and our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom we have believed.

By the time Elizabeth is six months pregnant she receives a visit from her cousin Mary. Mary has great news for her cousin. Mary's news is that she is to be the mother of the Messiah. Let us read verse 41 to see the effect on Elizabeth and the unborn child. "And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit". How remarkable that what Elizabeth heard, the child in the womb also heard and responded by leaping for joy! Elizabeth is also affected and 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 fulfilment of those things which were told her from the Lord" (verses 42 to 45).

There are many reasons why Elizabeth should be visited by Mary.

- a. They were cousins.
- b. They had a common interest in that both were to have babies.

But, more important is the fact that their lives had both been touched by God in a unique and special way to fulfil divine counsel and purpose.

5. A Baby called John.

In verse 57 we have stated, "Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son". This fulfils what the angel Gabriel said (look back at verse 13). In the next verse, we have joy, "When her neighbours and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her". This fulfils verse 14 mentioned earlier.

In verses 59 to 63 we have a debate as to the name to be given to the child at his circumcision. Some recommended that the child should be named after his father Zacharias. It is at this point that Elizabeth speaks and remains faithful to the word of the angel Gabriel who had said that his name was to be John (see verse 13). But this is not accepted. "John is not a name in your family", they argued. It is still the custom amongst some in this country to maintain family names from generation to generation, if not the first then the second or subsequent name. So here with this baby they wanted to maintain the tradition and they appeal to Zacharias. Now Zacharias is dumb, made so by the angel Gabriel because he doubted the message of good news from God. Zacharias, however, writes that the baby's name is to be

John. Not only are the people amazed at this departure from tradition but immediately Zacharias is able to speak (see verse 64). This fulfils what we read in verse 20 earlier. What are the first words of Zacharias? Praise to God!

The fact that Zacharias can now speak affects the people even more than giving the name of John to the baby. The people become somewhat frightened, so much so that they wonder what kind of child had been born. However, as we see in verse 66, God was going to protect John as He had a great work for him to do, "And the hand of the Lord was with him". If we also look at verse 80 we find that "the child grew and became strong in spirit". John was to grow and develop into the role which God had for him, as the forerunner of the Messiah.

Let us read verses 67 to 79 as we draw to a close this talk on the family of Zacharias and Elizabeth. In these verses we have the third member of the family mentioned as being filled with the Holy Spirit. Not only does Zacharias praise God when he is able to speak but here, as being full of the Holy Spirit, he prophesied, saying: "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, 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, the oath which He swore to our father Abraham: 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. 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, 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."

What Zacharias prophesied are sentiments which are found in the Psalms and the books of the Old Testament prophets. Psalm 106 is worth considering alongside the above verses. There is a similarity of concern being expressed and longed for. In Matthew 11:9-10, we find the Lord Jesus confirming that which Zacharias said of his son. The prophecy was absolutely true.

To conclude.

God honours faithfulness to Himself. Zacharias and Elizabeth happened to be that particular couple to be used of God to be the parents of John the Baptist. They were old, Zacharias became dumb for a while and Elizabeth departed from tradition by insisting upon John's name. Although Zacharias had a doubt, they were still a faithful couple. God still looks for faithfulness, not only in individuals but in families. John was a distinct person but his parents demonstrate that lives can be given to God by allowing the Holy Spirit to take control.

Let us pray. Our God and Father help us to be found faithful. That day by day we may be useable to Yourself. That selfish interests may not control our lives but that we allow Your Spirit to guide us for Your glory. We ask this in the name of Your Son our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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