

The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold

Luke 1: 5-25

DIG: What stands out to you about Zechariah and Elizabeth? Barrenness was seen as a sign of God's disfavor and a legitimate reason for divorce. How do you think Elizabeth felt about herself? How do you think Zechariah felt about her? Why? What were the odds that Zechariah would be chosen to offer the incense on the golden altar in the Holy Place? How, then, did it happen? How would the birth of this son impact Z'kharyah and Elisheva? How would you describe his mission in your own words? Why might Zechariah doubt?

REFLECT: How has ADONAI kept His oath or promise to you? Do you feel spiritually barren in any way? How might this account of Elizabeth and Zechariah affect your feelings of barrenness? Of the major characters in this account - John, Z'kharyah and Elisheva - which one do you identify with the most? Why? With whom do you identify with the least? Why? How is John's mission a model for your mission today? How might you "prepare people for the Lord?" When was the last time you doubted God? What caused your doubt? How did you overcome it?

It was the time of the morning sacrifice. As the massive Temple gates slowly swung on their hinges, three blasts from the silver trumpets of the priests seemed to waken the City, as if the voice of God, to the life of another day. The ministering Levites, who acted as the representatives of Isra'el, hurried to their duties. For already the first blush of dawn, for which the priest on the highest pinnacle of the Temple had watched as a signal to begin the morning sacrifice, could then be seen. Within the courts below all had long been busy. There were probably about fifty priests on duty each day. First they divided into two parties to make an inspection of the Temple by torchlight well before dawn. Then they all met at the well-known Hall of Polished Stones where the Sanhedrin met (see Lg - The Great Sanhedrin), and there they drew lots for their sacred duties for that day.

In First Chronicles 24, King David divided the Tribe of Levi into twenty-four divisions. Each division would take turns for a period of two weeks to take care of the daily functions of the Temple rituals twice a year. During the major pilgrimage festivals of Pesach, Shavu'ot, and Sukkot, all the divisions served. There was one high priest, below him were twenty chief priests and under them were the members of the twenty-four courses, who were the common priests. Zechariah was a common priest who belonged to the priestly course of Abihah. The duties of the common priests were chosen by lot. There were so many Levites,

however, that **they** usually had only one chance in **their** whole lifetime to serve. Nevertheless, **Z'kharyah** went up from **his** home to take part in the sacred tasks of service five times each year at the **Temple**.³⁸

Lots were drawn four times that day, twice before **the** great **Temple** gates were opened and twice afterwards. This arrangement had been made necessary because of the overzealousness that some of **the** **priests** had demonstrated for service. This is how **the** **lots** were chosen: **the** common **priests** stood in a circle around **the** **high** **priest**, who for a moment removed the headgear of one of **their** number, to show that **he** would begin counting. Then all held up one, two or more fingers - **since the Oral Law** (see **Ei - The Oral Law**) **said it was unlawful to count persons** - and **the** **high** **priest** called out a random number, say sixty, and began counting fingers until **he** reached that number, which meant that the lot had fallen on that particular **priest**.³⁹

The first lot chosen was for the cleansing and preparation of **the** bronze **altar** in the courtyard (see my commentary on **Exodus Fa - The Bronze Altar in the Tabernacle: A Shadow of the Good Things to Come**). This was done before dawn as **the** **priests** stirred the coals on **the** **altar** and added new wood so the flame would not go out (**Lev 6:12-13**).

It was barely dawn when **the** **priests** met again in the great Hall of Polished Stones to draw **the** **second** **lot**. Some of those who were chosen would take part in the burnt offering sacrifice on **the** bronze **altar** (see my commentary on **Exodus Fe - The Burnt Offering**), while the others trimmed the golden lampstand and made ready **the** golden **altar** of **incense** in **the** **Holy** **Place** (see my commentary on **Exodus Fn - The Lampstand in the Sanctuary: Christ, the Light of the World**). Once **the** bronze **altar** and **the** **altar** of **incense** were ready, dawn had broken and nothing more remained before the gates to **the** **Temple** were opened and the worshipers entered **the** **Temple** courts.

Once the sacrifice was made, all was ready for the most solemn part of the day's service - **the** offering of **incense** on **the** golden **altar** within **the** **Holy** **Place**. **The** **priests** meet again for **the** **third** **lot**. It was the most important lot of the day because it determined who was to offer the incense on **the** golden **altar** (see my commentary on **Exodus Fp - The Altar of Incense in the Sanctuary: Christ, Our Advocate with the Father**). Only once in a lifetime might any one enjoy that privilege.

Once **the** **incense** was burned, **the** **priests** met one last time in the Hall of Polished Stones. **The** **fourth** **lot** fixed those who were to burn the pieces of the slaughtered lamb on **the** **altar**, and to perform the concluding portions of the service. Except for burning **the** **incense**, the morning **lots** also held good for the evening service.⁴⁰

God's announcement to Z'kharyah took place in the time of Herod the Great, king of Judea, who died in 4 BC. The political condition of the people of Isra'el was deplorable and their spiritual condition was in decline. Herod, a monster of crime, oppressed them, and their faith under pharisaic Judaism had become an empty system of ceremonies and rituals. But in the midst of that spiritual drought there was a priest from the tribe of Levi named Zechariah, and his wife Elizabeth who was also a descendant of Aaron (Luke 1:5).⁴¹ Great care was taken in the selection of wives for the priests, so that the family line might be kept unblemished in every respect.⁴² So Z'kharyah was doubly blessed because the rabbis taught that to be a priest was an honor, but to be married to the daughter of a priest was a double honor. Yochanan, therefore, was a priest by lineage. Zechariah means God remembers, and Elisheva means the oath of God. So together their names mean God remembers His oath.

Both of them were members of the believing Jewish remnant of that day; and therefore, righteous in the sight of God. As evidence of their righteousness they observed all of ADONAI's commands and decrees blamelessly (Luke 1:6). They loved the LORD, their fellow man, and they trusted in His Word. But they had no children because Elisheva was barren. Barrenness was seen as a sign of Ha'Shem's displeasure and would have been a constant embarrassment to Elizabeth as is evident from her statement that the LORD had taken away her disgrace when she finally gave birth to John (Luke 1:25). In the Jewish culture the wife was always blamed for barrenness because at that time they did not understand that the male could be the infertile spouse. Because barrenness was a legitimate reason for divorce, we can only surmise that Z'kharyah loved her very much. Most likely he felt more sorry for her than he did for himself that she was disgraced. And they were both very old, which meant that they were probably over sixty years old (Luke 1:7), and they probably prayed year after year after year for a child. Thus, the stage was set for another series of miraculous births of important men that began with Isaac to 100-year-old Abraham and 90-year-old Sarah (Genesis 18:1-5, 21:1-7), Sampson to Manoah and his wife (Judges 13) and Samuel to Elkanah and Hannah (First Samuel 1:1 to 2:10). After the birth of Yochanan to Elizabeth, the series concludes with the birth of Yeshua the Messiah to the virgin Miryam. But on that bright autumn morning in the Temple, Z'kharyah had something more pressing to think about.⁴³

Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God. For the first and last time in his life he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the Temple of the LORD and burn incense before Him (Luke 1:8-9). What were the odds that he would be chosen? The sovereignty of Ha'Shem was clearly in control of this event. All his attention needed to be focused on the task at hand.

For two weeks, twice a day, **Zechariah's** duty was to take a burning coal from **the bronze altar** in the courtyard into **the Holy Place** within **the Temple**, and place it on **the altar of incense** that stood before the curtain (see **Lw - Accompanying Signs of Jesus' Death**) that separated **the Most Holy Place** from **the Holy Place**. After setting the coal down upon **the golden altar of incense**, he would then drop some of **the incense** on it causing a sweet-smelling smoke **of incense** to rise and penetrate through the thick curtain into **the Most Holy Place** to be a sweet-smelling aroma, a sacrifice to **ADONAI**.

Because of an incident that occurred in **Leviticus 10** when the two sons of Aaron burned **the incense** improperly and were struck dead on the spot, **the rabbis taught that if the priest burned the incense improperly, he would also die on the spot. But before death, an angel, the angel of Death, would appear standing on the right side of the altar of incense.** **Z'kharyah** was not to use **strange fire** for his sacrifice or he would be killed instantly. Consequently, if **God** accepted the offering, **Zechariah** would come out of **the Holy Place** alive, if not, he would die right where he was standing.

And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside (**Luke 1:10**). At that moment **Zechariah** was the focal point of the entire Jewish nation. Then, just at the climax of his priestly life, as the cloud of incense began to rise an angel of **ADONAI** appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar. When **Z'kharyah** saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear, literally *fear fell on him*. But the message of the angel was not one of judgment and death, but of blessing and a new life to come. The angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, **Zechariah**; your prayer has been heard. Your wife **Elisheva** will bear you a son, and you are to call him **Yochanan**" (**Luke 1:11-13**). The Hebrew word for **John** means *grace*, pointing to the new dispensation of grace (see my commentary on **Hebrews**). The angel **Gabriel** not only gave the name of the son, but also detailed **six aspects of John's character**:

1. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth (Luke 1:14). **Luke** frequently uses the word **joy** and links it to salvation. In **Luke 15**, he used the words **joy** and **rejoicing** three times when something that was **lost** had been **found**, a picture of salvation. Thus, **Yochanan's** ministry would bring **joy** to the Israelites who would have faith in his message of repentance for the forgiveness of their sins.

2. He will be great in the sight of ADONAI. The expression *enopion*, or: **in the sight of**, is typical of **Luke**. Although it appears thirty-five times in **Luke** and **Acts**, **John 20:30** is the only other time it is used in the Gospels.

3. He will be a Nazirite from birth (Numbers 6:1-21), and will never take wine or other fermented drink to perhaps show the urgency of his message. Normally a person would choose this for himself, but, in the TaNaKh, God chose two men to be set apart as a Nazirite from birth: Samuel and Sampson. Samuel was faithful but Sampson was not. Later, Yochanan voluntarily took the Nazirite vow upon himself and refused to drink anything fermented, because those who are Nazirites had to totally abstain from anything having to do with grapes. Another way he emphasized the urgency of his message was to dress, act and eat like the prophet Elijah (Second Kings 1:8; Matthew 1:8).

4. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born (Luke 1:15). When Mary visited Elizabeth before John was born, the baby leaped in her womb. The ministry of the Ruach HaKodesh was important to Luke, and he often went to great lengths to show His empowering and enabling ministry. Both Z'kharyah and Elisheva were filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:41 and 67). Sometimes people make a big deal between being filled or baptized (Luke 3:16b) with the Ruach HaKodesh, as opposed to being filled by the Spirit, or in the Spirit. They might say, "Well, you might be filled by the Spirit, but are you filled with the Spirit." Those distinctions, however, are not seen in the original language. The phrase, *en pneumati*, has a semantic range that can be translated, *in*, *by* or *with* the Ruach HaKodesh. Therefore, New Covenant believers are baptized in/by/with the Holy Spirit only one time in their lives at the moment of conversion (see Bw - [What God Does For Us at the Moment of Faith](#)).

5. He will bring back many of the people of Isra'el to the LORD their God (Luke 1:16). His special task was to prepare the people of Isra'el for the Messiah and many of them did turn back to God through Yochanan's ministry (Matthew 3:5-6; Mark 1:4-5).

6. He will go on before ADONAI (Isaiah 40:3-5), in the spirit and power of Elijah. He is not Elijah, but would minister in the spirit and power of Elijah. Evidently Z'kharyah understood that the angel Gabriel was identifying his future son with the messenger of Malachi 3:1, for in his song of praise he noted that John would go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him (Luke 1:76 and 3:4-6). He would 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 (Luke 1:17). Yochanan was not Elijah, but he functioned with the same power and authority to prepare the way. Jesus affirmed that John was the fulfillment of Malachi 3:1 in Mat 11:10, and stated that John would have fulfilled Malachi 4:4-5 if the nation of Isra'el had accepted his message (Matthew 11:14).

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this?" This question was cloaked in doubt. Faced by this astounding message, **Z'kharyah** responded like Abraham with a request for a sign (**Genesis 15:8**). He could not believe the message, saying: **I am an old man and my wife is well along in years (Luke 1:18)**. Sometimes you need to be careful before you ask for something because you just may get it. In this case he got his sign and was struck deaf and mute because of his unbelief (**Luke 1:22**).

The angel said to him, **"I am Gabriel,"** who foretold of **Christ's** coming (**Dan 9:25**). **"I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this Good News"** (**Luke 1:19**). It is interesting to note that here Muslims teach that the Bible contradicts itself. They quote **Matthew 1:18** where it says: **Mary was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit**, but here they say that **Gabriel** impregnated her. Which is obviously false. But the things of the Lord are spiritually discerned. This just goes to show how far Muslims really are in spiritual darkness. Later the angel **Gabriel** will tell **Mary**, **"The Ruach HaKodesh will come over you, and the power of Ha'Elyon will overshadow you. Therefore, the holy child born to you will be called the Son of God"** (**Luke 1:35 CJB**).

As a result of his lack of faith, the angel **Gabriel** told him, **"And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time"** (**Luke 1:20**). **Zechariah's** inability to speak until the fulfillment of **Gabriel's** message was, to some degree, a punishment for his unbelief. But it was also a sign (**Ezekiel 3:26** and **24:27**). A sign in the TaNaKh was often associated with a confirming, observable occurrence that accompanied a word of prophecy. Subsequently, for the next nine months **Z'kharyah's** attempts to speak would prove the reliability of **Gabriel's** message.⁴⁴

The scene then shifted to the huge crowd waiting outside in the courts of the Temple. The conversation between **Zechariah** and the angel had delayed him from coming out of the Holy Place in the normal amount of time. Meanwhile, the people were waiting for **Z'kharyah** and wondering why he stayed so long in the Temple (**Luke 1:21**). The prayers of the people had been offered, and their anxious gaze was directed towards the Holy Place. At last **Zechariah** emerged and stood on top of the steps that led from the porch to the court of the Priests (see **Mw - The Diagram of the Second Temple**), waiting to lead the priestly benediction which preceded the daily burnt offering (see my commentary on **Exodus Fe - The Burnt Offering**) and the chant of the Psalms of praise, accompanied with the joyous sound of music, as the drink offering was poured out.

The sign of **Z'kharyah**, however, was also to be a sign to the nation of **Isra'el** as well. The pieces of the sacrifice had already been arranged in the proper order on **the bronze altar**, **the priests** stood on the steps of the porch, and the aged **priest** had the attention of the nation as he came out of **the Holy Place**.⁴⁵ **The rabbis teach that the priest coming out of the Holy Place was expected to pronounce a blessing upon the people (Numbers 6:24-26)**. But when he came out, he could not speak to them. The people realized, however, that he had seen a vision in the Temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak (Luke 1:22).

Zechariah was not one of the "learned" priests, **nor was he what the rabbis would call a model priest**. They would have described him as *an idiot priest*. When the term *idiot* is mentioned in conjunction with the word **priest**, it usually means *a common priest*, in distinction to **the high priest**. However, the word unquestionably also signifies someone who is vulgar, ignorant, and illiterate.⁴⁶

When his time of service was completed, he returned home to the hill country of Judah. But **ADONAI** had fulfilled the word that **He** had spoken by **His angel**. **After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant, and for the last five months of her pregnancy, she remained in complete seclusion (Luke 1:23-24)**. This secrecy ensured that the revelation of her pregnancy would first be made to **Mary five months later (Luke 1:26, 36 and 56)**. As a result, the divine timetable was maintained.⁴⁷ **Elisheva** interpreted her pregnancy as a gracious act of **God**. **ADONAI has done this for me, she said: in these days He has shown His favor and taken away my disgrace among the people (Luke 1:25)**. The perfect tense used here indicates a completed action with continuing results. **Elizabeth** brought into play the words of Rachel, another woman of the Scriptures whose barrenness was also ended by **Ha'Shem's** direct involvement (**Genesis 30:22-23**).⁴⁸ And like Rachel, there can be no doubt that **Elisheva** was overjoyed that **her** and **her** husband's prayers were answered. After many years they were finally able to have a baby.

For many of us, trusting in **ADONAI** is fine as long as our trust is something you believe can actually happen. It's funny that sometimes we find ourselves content to let **God** handle the ordinary things in life like giving us an opportunity to do well on a job interview or score well on a test. But, when it really comes to the hard things, the things that really seem impossible, many times our faith shrinks and we are often tempted to trust our own means rather than give the problem up to **God** (like Sarai suggesting that Abram have a child with Hagar to be her own). Being content to wait on **the Lord** for the impossible is something that most believers just simply have a hard time doing. We can all relate.

Why are we so reluctant to give **God** the impossible things and then sit back and wait for an answer? We know that **Ha'Elyon** has done the impossible in the past. **He** created something from nothing (**Genesis 1:1**). How impossible can you get? Even the simpler things like parting the waters of the Red Sea and sending manna and quail to **His** children in the desert were accomplished without so much as a bat of a **Holy** eyelash. Yet, when it comes to our impossible, the things that have us so stymied that we are at a total loss for a solution, we often find ourselves thinking that intellectually we know **the LORD** *could* do it, but it seems so far-fetched that **He would**. So we fight on alone, trusting that somehow luck or pluck will get the job done.

Perhaps it's just because we might feel we don't want to bother **God** with hard tasks. Perhaps it's because we feel foolish asking for really "big" things. More likely, however, it's because we have a schedule for things to happen and the hard things, the impossible things, need to be gotten out of the way quickly so that we can move on with our lives. We know that **ADONAI** has a solution for every problem in life. The problem is we often find ourselves reluctant to match our schedules with **His** timetable. It's like the man who fell off a cliff, but managed to grab a tree limb on the way down. He looks upward and yells: "Is anyone up there?" Then he hears a voice.

"I AM here. I AM **the Lord**. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, **Lord**, I believe. I really believe," the man says earnestly.

"But I can't hang on much longer."

"That's all right," came **the Lord's** reply. "If you really believe you have nothing to worry about. I will save you. Just let go of the branch."

There was a pause for a moment, and then he said, "Is anyone *else* up there?"

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Zechariah found out the hard way that **Ha'Shem** answers prayer as long as we are willing to leave the hard things, the impossible things, totally up to **Him**. **Z'kharyah** and **his wife Elisheva** had prayed for a child for a long time and now they were elderly and **her** womb was shut up. Yet, **she** bore a child because of **God's** willingness to grant the impossible if only we relegate the impossible to **Him** in the first place. **The LORD** is willing and able to reach down and make the impossible happen in our lives as well. It is easier said than done, but we need to believe **God** is willing and, most importantly, we need to be willing to endure what might be a wait in order to see the fruits of our prayers. When faced with the impossible it is often best to let go of our reluctance to trust in ourselves and give **ADONAI** the space **He** needs to work the miracles that **He** is so willing to do in our lives.