

A Father's Prophecy

Devotional Reading: Luke 1:5-17
Background Scripture: Luke 1:5-23, 57-80

Luke 1:67-80

67 And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying,

68 Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he hath visited and redeemed his people.

69 And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,

70 As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began.

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

72 To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant,

73 The oath which he sware to our father Abraham,

74 That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear,

75 In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.

76 And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest. For thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways,

77 To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins,

78 Through the tender mercy of our God, whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us,

79 To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

80 And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel.

Key Text

Thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest. For thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins. —Luke 1:76-77

A King

Forever and Ever

Unit 1: Jesus, the Heir of David

Lessons 1-5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Zacharias's prophecy.
2. Explain ways the prophecy could have been misunderstood in the first century AD.
3. Identify any "wilderness" of preparation the learner is in and opportunities for growth.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

A. Present-Day Heralds

B. Lesson Context

I. Prologue (Luke 1:67)

II. Celebrating God (Luke 1:68-75)

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B. For Results Certain (vv. 71-75)

III. Appointing John (Luke 1:76-78a)

A. His Calling (v. 76)

B. His Task (vv. 77-78a)

IV. Predicting Result (Luke 1:78b-79)

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V. Epilogue (Luke 1:80)

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Conclusion

A. Still Pointing to Jesus

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

I. Introduction

A. Present-Day Heralds

Over a decade ago, the mascot at the college where I work changed from a saint to a herald. At the time, some people expressed hesitation and questioned the change. One reason for the hesitation was that the role of a *herald* is relatively unknown.

Some countries, such as the United Kingdom, still have active heralds as employees of the sovereign, but such positions are not found in the majority of countries. Perhaps we have lost something in not maintaining the role of a herald.

B. Lesson Context

The Gospel of Luke was written about AD 60 by Luke the physician and traveling companion of the apostle Paul (Colossians 4:14). It was probably written during the period of a couple of years in which Paul was imprisoned at Caesarea (Acts 23-24). Luke was not an eyewitness to the events of Jesus' life. Even so, Luke was meticulous in his research (Luke 1:1-3). The result is the New Testament's marvelous third Gospel, written so that the reader may be convinced of the certainty of the book's contents. One of the individuals who Luke could have interviewed was Mary, the mother of Jesus, who would have had personal knowledge of much of the events of both the birth of John and, of course, Jesus.

Luke's Gospel begins by introducing a priest named Zacharias and his wife, Elisabeth. The couple was considered "righteous before God" and "blameless" regarding obedience to God's commandments (Luke 1:6). At the time of the introduction in the Gospel, the couple was without children due to their age and Elisabeth's barrenness (1:7).

The fact that Zacharias served as a priest in the division of Abia (Luke 1:5) is more significant than it might seem at first. According to the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, the priesthood of that time was organized into 24 divisions. That matches the organization noted in 1 Chronicles 24:1-19. Every division served in the temple for roughly two nonconsecutive weeks each year.

the assigned priests would complete the necessary tasks for the temple, including accepting and offering sacrifices, burning incense, and leading prayers (1 Chronicles 6:48-49; compare 23:28-32). During the time of Zacharias's service, an angel of the Lord named Gabriel visited him and informed him that he would have a son (Luke 1:8-19). Zacharias responded with doubt, questioning the validity of the angel's prophecy (1:18). The angel proclaimed that because of Zacharias's doubt, he would be unable to speak until the prophecies regarding the birth of the son were fulfilled (1:19-20).

The Scripture text in today's lesson includes a song of praise known as the *Benedictus*. The source of this title is the first word of Luke 1:68 in the Latin translation of the Bible known as the Vulgate, which dates to the fourth century AD. Perhaps it is better known to you as *Zacharias's Song*.

I. Prologue

(Luke 1:67)

67. And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying.

The disbelief of *Zacharias* when he received the angel's message (see Lesson Context) was replaced with being *filled with the Holy Ghost*. Luke, the author, seems to have a special interest in this person of the Trinity, who is mentioned in this Gospel about the same number of times as the other three Gospels combined. In the book of Acts, Luke's subsequent work, the Holy Ghost is mentioned more than 40 times. The presence of God's Spirit has been a necessary prerequisite for God's people to serve Him through prophetic ministry (examples: Numbers 11:25-27; Acts 2:17-18).

II. Celebrating God

(Luke 1:68-75)

A. For Promises Kept (vv. 68-70)

68. Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he hath visited and redeemed his people.

Zacharias begins a poetic expression of blessing and praise to God. Employing parallel expressions typical of biblical poetry, his song echoes key

themes of prophetic promise from Israel's Scriptures. As God had fulfilled His surprising promise that Zacharias would become a father, so God would fulfill His greatest promises for all.

Songs and psalms of thanksgiving often include a proclamation of praise to *the Lord God* (compare Psalms 72:18; 84:11). Mary's song of praise, called the *Magnificat*, also begins with her glorifying the Lord (Luke 1:46-47).

Zacharias praised the Lord because of the Lord's actions for His people. The Old Testament describes how the Lord had come and *visited* His people for blessing (examples: Genesis 21:1; Ruth 1:6) or because of their sin (examples: Exodus 20:5; 32:34).

The reason for His coming at this particular time was so that *his people* might be *redeemed*, a conclusion also reached by the crowd in Luke 7:16. As we attempt to grasp this concept, we can simplify by realizing that when we are introduced to Jesus in the pages of the New Testament, two issues are of utmost importance: *who Jesus is* in His essence and *what Jesus did* in terms of His mission. The shorthand way of saying this is that we are learning about the person and work of Christ.

The four Gospels focus heavily on the first part of that inquiry, on establishing and describing the person of Christ. The four Gospels, however, spend almost no time explaining the work of Christ. We hasten to add that by "work," we don't mean Jesus' miracles of healing, exorcism, etc. By "work," we are referring to the eternal results of His death, burial, and resurrection. Thus, we have to wait until Paul's epistles before we can fully grasp the "how" of the phrase *redeemed his people*.

69. And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.

The song's prophetic nature is on display as it announces the means by which the redemption arrives. In the Old Testament, animal horns were symbols of power (examples: Deuteronomy 33:17; Psalm 18:2; Zechariah 1:18-21). Through the power of the Lord God, the promised redemption—a *horn of salvation*—would come, vanquishing enemies and ruling as Messiah (see Psalm 132:17).

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Zacharias recognized that the Messiah would come from one specific lineage: *the house of . . . David*. Centuries before Zacharias lived, the prophet Nathan had stated that the Lord would establish His kingdom in and through the house of David (2 Samuel 7:12-16; compare Isaiah 9:6-7). This would bring righteousness, peace, and salvation (Isaiah 11:1-9; Jeremiah 23:5-6; 33:15-16). About six months after the birth of John, a descendant of the house of David was indeed born to fulfill the promises; His name was Jesus (Luke 1:27-32; 3:23).

70. As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began.

This verse reminds readers that God's plan was not a new thing; rather, it had been set forth through *his holy prophets* of centuries past (example: Jeremiah 23:5; compare Acts 3:21; Romans 1:2; Hebrews 1:1; 1 Peter 1:10-12). The person and work of Jesus the Messiah validated the predictions of the prophets (Luke 24:25-27). The message of the prophets comes to a focal point in the message of Zacharias's son, henceforth known as John the Baptist, who later proclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" when seeing Jesus (John 1:29).

What Do You Think?

What has been your experience of reading or studying the Old Testament prophets?

Digging Deeper

What preparation could make your study more beneficial to your spiritual development?

B. For Results Certain (vv. 71-75)

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

The theme of salvation by God's Messiah is repeated often in the Gospels. Indeed, that message of salvation is their primary message! But as events would unfold, God's idea of who their main *enemies* were didn't match who the Jewish leaders and people thought were their enemies.

This misidentification distracted Jesus' own apostles right up to the time of Jesus' ascension (Acts 1:6). "The Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8), not the works of the Roman Empire.

What Do You Think?

What sets biblical teaching about enemies apart from worldly wisdom on the topic?

Digging Deeper

How do your speech and actions to enemies mark you as a follower of Christ?

72. To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant.

God's promise *to perform . . . mercy* is witnessed in passages such as Micah 7:20: "Thou wilt perform the truth to Jacob, and the mercy to Abraham, which thou hast sworn unto our fathers from the days of old." Considering the ancient use of the literary technique of parallelism, this is the same as remembering *his holy covenant* (compare Psalms 105:8-9; 106:45; Ezekiel 16:60). The next verse offers an additional layer to this parallelism.

73. The oath which he sware to our father Abraham.

This *oath* is described in Genesis 22:16-18; it is the same as "his holy covenant" of Luke 1:72, just considered. Consider these two time frames: as we are now looking 2,000 years into the past to consider what Zacharias has written, Zacharias himself was looking 2,000 years into his own past to consider the covenant with *our father Abraham*. The centuries have proven God to be trustworthy and faithful; He keeps His promises to His people (Joshua 21:45; Psalm 145:13).

The passage of centuries had not dimmed Zacharias's expectations, and neither should they dim ours. As Zacharias could praise the Lord God, so should we (compare other praise in Luke 1:46-55; 2:28-32, 36-38).

74. That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear.

The oath granted to Abraham extended to the

people of Zacharias's day (*unto us*). Nine months of being unable to speak (Luke 1:20, 64) had allowed Zacharias time to reflect on the fact that when the Lord speaks, people should listen rather than run off at the mouth!

As a priest, Zacharias was intensely interested in being able to *serve* the Lord (compare Hebrews 9:14). Interestingly, the underlying Greek word translated "serve" is also translated "worship" in Acts 7:42; 24:14. To serve God is to worship Him; to worship God is to serve Him. By the Messiah's deliverance, God's people will be able to do so *without fear*, without the specter of further defeat or persecution hanging over their heads. The way it will happen—through Jesus' death and resurrection—and one result of its happening—freedom from earthly fear (Romans 8:15; Philippians 1:14)—will astonish everyone. As Zacharias speaks, the Israelites live in fear of their *enemies*: the Roman overlords and the Jewish leadership (John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). The greater fear that God will eliminate, however, is the fear of death (Hebrews 2:15).

75. In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.

As a devoted priest, Zacharias knew what it meant to serve the Lord. All his life, he had been "righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (Luke 1:6). God desires the same for others. *Holiness* means to be set apart from sin; *righteousness* means that the people always do the right thing in the eyes of God. The only other place in the New Testament where the words translated "holiness" and "righteousness" occur together is Ephesians 4:24: "[Ye were taught] that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness" (compare Titus 2:11-14).

Zacharias's expectation was partially fulfilled

when Christ established the church, whose members are a "holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). The ultimate fulfillment will come when we serve Christ in full holiness in Heaven (Revelation 22:3).

What Do You Think?

How accurate would it be to say that you serve God without fear and in holiness and righteousness?

Digging Deeper

To the extent that this statement is not completely true, what step(s) can you take to improve this week?

III. Appointing John

(Luke 1:76-78a)

A. His Calling (v. 76)

76. And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest. For thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways.

Zacharias switches focus to his (only) *child*, John, and John's pending role in God's plan of salvation. That role will be to prepare hearts and minds for the coming of a greater one. John was to be like a herald, coming in advance of the king and announcing the king's arrival so that people might prepare. John was to be "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Luke 3:4, quoting Isaiah 40:3; compare Malachi 3:1). Some 30 years later, John's ministry fulfilled the words of his father (Matthew 3:11-12; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:1-18; John 1:19-34).

Implied in this ministry is the kind of prophetic work Israel knew from earlier times when prophets like Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah took up their own prophetic ministries. This child would become *the prophet of the Highest* (compare Mark 11:32) as the forerunner of the coming Lord. He would be like the prophet Elijah (Elias), preparing the people for the promised salvation (Matthew 11:14). Such a description is consistent with the announcement of the angel regarding John's birth, saying that John will "go before [the Lord]

How to Say It

Abia	Uh-bye-yuh.
Gabriel	Gay-bree-ul.
Josephus	Jo-see-fus.
Messiah	Meh-sigh-uh.
Zacharias	Zack-uh-rye-us.

in the spirit and power of Elias" (Luke 1:17) as he turns "the children of Israel . . . back to the Lord their God" (1:16).

What Do You Think?

To what degree is our calling (example: Matthew 28:16-20) like John's calling?

Digging Deeper

What challenges do we face in fulfilling our calling? What encouragement can we take from John's example of ministry?

B. His Task (vv. 77-78a)

77. To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins.

The underlying Greek word for *remission* is translated elsewhere as "forgiveness" (examples: Mark 3:29; Acts 5:31; 13:38), and that is the sense here. John's ministry included calling for repentance (Matthew 3:2) and "preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Luke 3:3).

The *salvation* mentioned here would prove to be more than just political salvation from oppression; *people* would be offered a spiritual, eternal *salvation*. The hope and mercy that God's people desired would come from God's redemption and salvation in Christ (Acts 4:8-12; Romans 8; Hebrews 9:28; etc.).

78a. Through the tender mercy of our God.



The sun has risen on us.

Luke 1:79

Visual for Lesson 3. As the class discusses verse 79, ask learners to take one minute to consider whether there is any darkness they have not renounced.

The designation of the Lord as *our God* occurs more than 200 times in the Bible. God is not an abstract concept; He is intensely personal. The fictitious gods of paganism cannot be characterized by their *tender mercy*—those gods are seen as fickle. The word translated "tender" is *erēnē*, meaning "tender" in a literal, physical sense, it refers to one's bowels or intestines (Acts 1:18). In a figurative or emotional sense, this area of a person was considered to be the center or origin of compassion (see the word's translation as "affection" in 2 Corinthians 7:15; an intense form of the word occurs in James 5:11).

IV. Predicting Result

(Luke 1:78b-79)

78b-79. Whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

By contrast, today we speak of one's heart as that center or origin. So, we can say that Zacharias's Song reminds us that God's motivation for sending the Messiah is the mercy of God's own heart. That mercy brings something like the dawning of a new day, to which *the dayspring from on high* refers.

Darkness is a common image for the state of those who oppose God (examples: Psalm 107:10-11; Jeremiah 23:12; John 3:19; 1 Corinthians 4:5; Ephesians 6:12). In this state, *death* is inevitable (Romans 5:12; 6:23). But God promises to *give light* to those in this state (Isaiah 9:2; Matthew 4:16; Acts 26:18). It is Jesus who brings light into darkness (John 8:12). A sad and continuing part of the problem, however, is that although "light is come into the world, . . . men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19).

Deadline: Year 2020?

Back in the year 2010, a former Minister of Defence in Canada revealed his skeptical view of humanity's future in his book *Light at the End of the Tunnel*. He asserted that the year 2020 was the deadline for ending dependence on fossil fuels for

energy. Exotic forms of energy already existed, he claimed, but a "shadow government" controlled their secret. One of the writer's imperatives was that all people must find ways to work together for the common good.

As of this writing (October 2023), the dire predictions have not come to pass, claimed "right nows" have not been verified, and working together for the common good is as much of a pipe dream as it ever was.

Two millennia ago, Zacharias announced by the Holy Spirit a very dissimilar "was / now / will be." Unlike that of the writer above, the elements of the prophecy of Zacharias lined up perfectly, as 2,000 years of history have proven. Those who prophesy by their own insight aren't always guaranteed to be correct; those who prophesy by God's empowerment are always right, to the farthest distance of the future. How will you prepare yourself to demonstrate this to a skeptic?

—R. L. N.

V. Epilogue

(Luke 1:80)

80. And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel.

This verse takes us out of Zacharias's Song and summarizes John's formative years. Luke's Gospel provides parallel statements about Jesus (Luke 2:40, 52). Becoming *strong in spirit* may refer either to John's determined willingness to conform to God's will, or it may describe the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life.

Your Preparation Context(s)

The contrast between what we might call the "preparation contexts" of Joseph and Moses is fascinating: Joseph was prepared in a desert to serve in a palace (Genesis 37:1-22; 41:39-40); Moses was prepared in a palace to serve in a desert (Exodus 2:10; 3:1). Other preparation contexts are equally fascinating. The apostle Paul, for example, was a rising star in first-century Judaism (Acts 22:3; Galatians 1:14). But when he as persecutor became the persecuted, his preparation context changed

abruptly from that of the city to the desert (Galatians 1:17-18) to . . . everywhere.

We could explore other examples. Springing immediately to mind are the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and John the Baptist. Such an exploration also invites a consideration of our own personal preparation contexts. The biblical examples teach us that as much as we might like to have a comfortable, familiar preparation environment that is followed by an equally comfortable service setting, it just won't happen that way. That's not God's pattern. In what ways do you need to change your expectations in this regard?

—R. L. N.

What Do You Think?

How can the "deserts" be places of preparation for us?

Digging Deeper

What practices can prepare us to be formed by these desolate experiences?

Conclusion

A. Still Pointing to Jesus

Speechless for nine months, Zacharias offered an impressive, memorable song in celebration of John's birth. Layering phrase after phrase from the ancient prophets, he made clear to all that the time of fulfillment had arrived.

We are the beneficiaries of those promises and their fulfillment. We have the holy Scriptures so that we can know the factual certainty of it all (Luke 1:4). As we do, we experience the salvation, mercy, knowledge, and light that God gives in Jesus Christ. Our expression of joy and thanks ought to be at least as vivid as Zacharias's, if not more so.

B. Prayer

Great God, we thank You that by Your mercy, we have received the fulfillment of Your eternal promises in Jesus. May we live in full confidence of Your abiding faithfulness. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Reject the darkness; embrace the light.