

Zechariah and Gabriel
Luke 1:5–25

Turn to Luke 1 please. I'll read our Scripture right through.

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. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 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. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 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."

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 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."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "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."

1 Two Births from God – Luke 1–2

Luke writes his Christmas story to get one truth across: God’s great work began with *two* miraculous births. By the birth of John and the birth of Jesus, those two together, six months apart, God began his great salvation work.

Luke keeps going back and forth between the two births, so that they are not two separate stories, they are one story. First Gabriel tells Zechariah about John, then Gabriel tells Mary about Jesus, then Mary makes a speech, then John is born, then Zechariah makes a speech, then John grows up in the right way, and then Jesus is born, and Jesus grows up the right way. From Luke’s Gospel, one cannot tell the story of Jesus’ birth without also telling the story of John’s birth. Luke does that on purpose.

Jesus is more important than John. But without John to prepare the way, Jesus would have accomplished far less. God began his kingdom with two special births.

2 Zechariah and Elizabeth – Luke 1:5–7

These two were godly people. They were both descendants of Aaron. Priests did not need to marry a woman from a priest family, but Zechariah had done so. These two would have liked Psalm 119 about the law. They loved the law and obeyed it. But they were old, and they had never been able to have children. They sound like Abraham and Sarah, and they are supposed remind us of Abraham and Sarah. John is like Isaac was to Abraham and Sarah.

3 God Brings Zechariah to the Incense Altar – Luke 1:8–10

There were many priests in Palestine by this time, and the priests in those days were organized into divisions. Each division would take care of temple duties for two weeks. Every day there was a morning and afternoon sacrifice, and incense would be offered each time on the incense altar in the holy place, next to the curtain that separated the holy place from the holy of holies.

Since there was a crowd outside, it was probably the afternoon sacrifice. They chose by lot, some random method, which priest would go into the holy place to offer incense. It was an honour that a priest would get about once in a lifetime. Zechariah was chosen by lot, which means it was God’s choice. God wanted old Zechariah near the incense altar that evening, because God was sending an angel with a message for Zechariah. God brought Zechariah to the incense altar.

4 The Angel: You will have a Son – Luke 1:11–14

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 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. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth.

“Zechariah; your prayer has been heard.” Zechariah prayed for a son, and the angel tells him that his prayer has been heard. “You are to call him ‘John.’” “Yohan” means “Yahweh is gracious.” Call him “Yahweh is gracious” because God is being gracious to you and Elizabeth. “He will be a joy and delight to you.” Those are such happy words, aren’t they? Old Zechariah and Elizabeth would thoroughly enjoy this child.

5 He will Turn Many Israelites to the Lord – Luke 1:15–16

He will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

No wine or fermented drink. That means he will be a Nazarite. No wine ever, and no hair cut ever. Being a Nazarite was one way of being devoted to God. Both Samson and Samuel were Nazarites, and now John the Baptist as well. In particular, John is like Samuel.

But the most important line is this: *He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.* Most of the Old Testament prophets did not do this. The prophets were faithful to God, but Israel did not listen to the prophets. Not so with John. *He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.* This also means that many Jews are no longer following the Lord their God, and they need to be brought back. God would do this through John.

6 Malachi’s Elijah to Prepare the People – Luke 1:17

I will read you a few lines from Malachi, lines that the angel uses. In Malachi, God says: *“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. See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.* (Mal. 3:1; 4:5–6)

The angel uses both of these Scriptures. John will be the messenger who gets the people ready for God. He will prepare the way for God. Malachi says it will be like Elijah coming again, which is what the angel tells Zechariah.

The angel concludes this way: *Zechariah, your son will 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.* “To make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” This messenger ahead of time is a mercy from God. If God shows up and his people are not ready, there will be dreadful judgment.

7 Zechariah and Gabriel and Daniel – Luke 1:18–20

Zechariah hears the angel but does not think that this is even possible. He says that to the angel. And now, people, now, we find out that this angel is none other than Gabriel. *The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 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.”*

Gabriel. The most important thing about Gabriel’s speech is that he tells us who he is. The book of Daniel mentions Gabriel twice, and Luke mentions Gabriel twice. Gabriel is nowhere else in the Bible. Gabriel comes to Zechariah and then to Mary. Daniel said that God controlled the great evil nations that ruled the world, and when God had had enough of them, God was going to destroy them all and set up his own kingdom on earth. The Jews in the time of Jesus liked Daniel because they liked that message.

And Gabriel was one of the angels that explained these things to Daniel, and now Gabriel shows up to tell Zechariah about the birth of John, and to tell Mary about the birth of Christ. That can only mean that God is now beginning the kingdom of God that Daniel foretold. John’s birth is the beginning of God’s rule on earth.

There are other similarities between Daniel and Zechariah. Gabriel came to Daniel when Daniel was praying at the time of the evening sacrifice, same as Zechariah. Daniel had a vision, and so did Zechariah. Daniel was speechless for a time, and so was Zechariah (Daniel 9:20–21; 10:15). This all tells us that the birth of John begins what Daniel predicted. He is also the coming Elijah that Malachi predicted.

8 Elizabeth Conceives

After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. “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.”

“The Lord has done this for me.” She was childless, which was discouraging and disgraceful, and God took these away. The ESV translates, “God looked on me to take away my reproach.” She’s happy, she’s thankful to God, and she hides, we don’t know why she hides. But Zechariah is speechless, and Elizabeth is hiding, so no one finds out what’s going on. Mary finds out when Gabriel tells her.

9 The Tender Mercy of our God – Luke 1:75–79

What I want you to see in this last section is the mercy of God in John’s preparing ministry. At the end of Luke 1, John is born, and finally Zechariah can speak again.

The Spirit fills him, and he wastes no time. The second half of his speech is about his new born son, and we'll read that, beginning in Luke 1:75.

*And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,*

John came to prepare the way for the Lord. Specifically, John came to give the Lord's people "knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins." They would know what salvation was when their sins were forgiven.

Why does John give God's people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins? Because of the tender mercy of our God. We have tasted this tender mercy. What God sent John to do has continued, and reached us. We also know what salvation is, through the forgiveness of our sins. That means we have tasted the tender mercy of our God that Zechariah described.

*... because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which [tender mercy], the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."*

"By which same tender mercy, the rising sun will come to us from heaven." Zechariah is talking about the Lord Jesus. John has just been born, so Mary is about three months pregnant, and Mary has already been to visit Elizabeth, and Mary told Elizabeth what Gabriel said, which is that Mary has conceived the Christ, the great David king to come! Jesus is the rising sun from heaven.

"The rising sun will come to us from heaven, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

This also is us. I don't know what my ancestors were up to when Zechariah made this speech, but nothing good. It was certainly living in darkness and in the shadow of death. Somewhere along the line, the tender mercy of God brought the rising sun from heaven into your life and mine, to guide our feet into the path of peace.

We'll end with the line Zechariah opened with: *Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.* We are not Israelites, but the God of Israel has a lot of tender mercy, and the rising sun has shone on also on the nations, and he has redeemed us also. Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come also to the nations and redeemed us. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord, we get lost in our own tired little stories. This is such a big refreshing story, and you have brought us into the middle of it. Help us to see that these words of Scripture are talking about us. They are telling us what has happened to us. Thank you for your tender mercies. Amen.

BENEDICTION: To him who is able to keep us from falling, and to present us before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.