

ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH, THE PARENTS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST: GODLY PARENTS

LUKE 01:05–25

Introduction

Every generation needs the example of godly parents. The parents of John the Baptist were dynamic, godly examples of what parents should be. They were human, showing some weaknesses, but they were striking examples for all.

- I. The parents of John the Baptist (v. 5).
- II. They were parents who were righteous (v. 6).
- III. They were parents with human problems (v. 7).
- IV. They were parents who worshipped (vv. 8-9)
- V. They were parents who prayed and led others to pray (v. 10).
- VI. They were parents greatly favoured by God (vv. 11-17).
- VII. They were parents who found it difficult to believe the humanly impossible (vv. 18-19).
- VIII. They were parents who had to be disciplined by God (vv. 20-22).
- IX. They were parents who saw God fulfil His promise (vv. 23-25)

I. Luke 01: 05 The Family of John the Baptist

The parents of John the Baptist. Note three facts.

1. The baby John was promised to his parents during the reign of Herod the Great, right at the very end of his reign (BC 37-4 AD) (See *Herod*, Mt. 2:3-4.)
 2. John's father was Zechariah.
 - a. *His name means* Remembered of Jehovah.
 - b. He was from the country, a mountainous or hilly section.
 - c. He was of "the priestly division of Abijah." This simply means a division of the priests. Remember that all the male descendants of Aaron were priests. There were over twenty thousand at this time and only one temple, so they had to be divided into groups (1 Chr. 24:1-6). Zechariah served in the eighth group or division (1 Chr. 24:10). There were twenty-four groups, and each group served in the temple for one week, twice a year.
 3. John's mother was Elizabeth.
 - a. *Her name means* One whose oath is to God.
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- b. She was the daughter of a priest.
- c. She was a pure woman, a virgin at her marriage. A priest was expected to marry a virgin (Lev. 21:14).

MATHEW 02:02–03 HEROD THE GREAT

Herod the Great was a bloody tyrant. Secular history records that he murdered many of his own family members including his favorite wife (he had ten), her grandfather, her brother, and some of his own children. On one occasion, he had the whole Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Jewish government, assassinated. On another occasion, he had murdered every notable man in Jerusalem. He was very capable of the crime reported here. Christ was born during the latter years of Herod's reign, and his reign as king had been a long one (37 BC to 4 AD). This fact shows just how much of a bloody tyrant Herod really was. He would not even be around when a child king would inherit the throne, yet he felt threatened by the reports of a child king. He was a man possessed by evil. He was suspicious, savage, and warped. Herod had all the children killed, not only in Bethlehem but also "in its vicinity" (v. 16). □

II. *Luke 01:06 The Righteous Parents of John*

They were parents who were righteous. Note four facts.

1. They "were *both* upright." They were joined together and committed to each other, and they lived for God and for each other as husband and wife.
2. They were "upright *in the sight of God*." Together they came before God seeking Him, that is, seeking to please Him and to live as He said.
3. They were "observing *all* the Lord's commandments and regulations." They controlled their thoughts, minds, tongues, and behaviour, diligently seeking to please the Lord in all they did.
4. They were blameless. This, of course, does not mean they were perfect. It means they were faithful, living in such a way that no one could charge them with open sin. They offended no one; they lived honestly before both God and men.

III. *Luke 01:07 Problems Faced by John's Parents*

They were parents with human problems. Being righteous did not free them from problems. They had to face the problems of this world just as all persons do. But there was a difference: they were upright in the sight of God. Therefore, they had the presence of God to help them through the problems. They had two serious problems.

1. They were childless. This was a terrible calamity to the people of those days. Children were considered a blessing from God, a great heritage from the Lord. In fact, a Jew whose wife could not bear children was thought to be cut off from God. He was expected to divorce his wife, remarry, and bear children. Therefore, being childless was a critical problem to Zechariah and Elizabeth, a problem that weighed ever so heavily upon their hearts and never left their minds. They felt disfavoured and displeasing to God.
2. They were elderly. All the problems that come with age either faced them or stood before them as a threat.

Mat 5:45 “That you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

1 Cor 10:13 No temptation [trial] has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

Psa 69:20 Scorn has broken my heart and has left me helpless; I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but I found none.

IV. Luke 01:08–09 The Faithful Worship of John’s Parents

They were parents who worshipped. Zechariah was faithful to his priesthood. He had been chosen and ordained by God to be a priest, and he was faithful to that call. He was faithful and steadfast in his duties despite the lack of blessings from God, that is, being childless. Remember that bearing a son in those days and times was considered one of the greatest blessings and signs of God’s approval. Not having a son was thought to be an indication of God’s disapproval.

What happened was this. In the temple’s daily worship, incense was burned upon the altar by a priest before the morning sacrifice and after the evening sacrifice. The offering of incense symbolized that the sacrifices were being offered up to God in the sweetest and most prayerful of spirits. The aroma of the incense was just like prayer; it enveloped the sacrifice and carried it before the very throne of God.

The priests considered the burning of incense to be the highest privilege of the priestly functions. However, because of the large number of priests, some never had the opportunity to offer it up to God. Who should receive this privilege was determined by drawing lots. On this particular day, Zechariah experienced one of the greatest days of his life. The lot fell upon him. He was the chosen priest to offer the incense.

The point is this: Zechariah was faithful to God’s call. He had been chosen and ordained by God to be a priest, and he had accepted and given his life to that call. He was faithful in his worship despite his *problems and lack of blessings* from God (being childless).

James 1:12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

James 5:11 As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

V. Luke 01:10 The Prayerful Parents of John

They were parents who prayed. Zechariah was praying while he offered the incense up to God, and he had led the people to pray while he sought the Lord on their behalf (see v. 13). He had led them to be a praying people. They were to be as involved in the prayer and worship as he was.

Mat 18:19 "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven."

1 Chr 16:11 Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always.

Psa 91:15 He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him.

VI. Luke 01:11-17 Blessings Showered on John's Parents

They were parents greatly favoured by God. God is bound to bless and highly favour any parent...

- who is righteous or upright
- who worships
- who prays
- who leads others to worship and pray

God favoured Zechariah and Elizabeth in five ways.

1. Their need was met by God in a very personal way. God sent an angel to Zechariah. Note the angel appeared on the right side of the altar of incense, the very place of prayer. It was while he was praying, in the act of obedience, that God met his need in this special way.
2. Their prayers were answered. Note the exact words of the Scripture: "Your prayer has been heard." What prayer?

=> Was Zechariah pouring his heart out about being childless, despite his age?

=> Was Zechariah praying for the redemption of Israel, for the coming of the Messiah?

Scripture does not say. But *both* prayers were now being answered. Elizabeth was to bear a son, and the Messiah was to be born. Their son was to be named John which means *the grace of Jehovah*.

3. Their son was to be great.
 - a. He would cause his parents to rejoice because of his *life*. He was to be everything that parents could want in a child. He would not shame them, but he would bring joy to their hearts.
 - b. He would cause many to rejoice because of his *contribution* to society. He would bring joy to all their friends, and he would bring joy to the nation as a whole. Many would joy in such a commitment and contribution as his.
 - c. He would be great in the sight of God Himself, great because of his *faithfulness* (obedience). He would be like one of the great prophets of old.
 - d. He would live a *disciplined* and *controlled* life, abstaining from wine and strong drink and from the very appearance of evil.
 - e. He would be filled with the *Holy Spirit* from the very first, a vessel chosen by God for a very special service, *fitted* in a very special way.

Thought 1. Note the five traits that made John great. How desperately believers need the same traits in their own lives.

Rom 12:1-2 *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

1 Tim 1:12 *I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service.*

Thought 2. The point to see about Zechariah and Elizabeth is that God did hear their prayer and bless them richly. He favoured them because they were faithful to Him.

John 15:7 *"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you."*

1 John 3:22 *And receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.*

4. Their son was to be a prophet, turning many to the Lord God.
5. Their son was to be the forerunner of the promised Messiah. His ministry was to be like that of Elijah, the greatest of the prophets (Mal. 4:5; see Mt. 17:10).

VII. *Luke 01:18-19 The Unbelief of Zachariah*

They were parents who found it difficult to believe the humanly impossible. Note two things.

1. Zechariah just could not believe the message and the promise of God. He had been praying, but apparently he had not thought God would answer, certainly not by doing the impossible — by overruling the laws of nature. Note that Zechariah's question was the question of unbelief. He asked the very same question asked by Abraham (Gen. 15:8), but Zechariah asked the question in a spirit of unbelief. He informed the angel that he and Elizabeth were too old to have children.
2. The very Word and promise of God should have been enough to convince Zechariah, but he was weak in faith. He had to ask for additional assurance. He asked for a sign — a sign other than *God's Word and promise* (see *Gabriel*, Lk. 1:19).

LUKE 01:19 GABRIEL

Gabriel means the *man of God* or the *hero of God* or the *mighty one of God*. Note that Gabriel said two things about himself...

1. He is the one who actually stands in the presence of God.
 2. He is the one who brings good news to men.
- => He shared the restoration of Israel with Daniel (Dan. 8:16; 9:21f).
=> He shared the birth of the forerunner with Zechariah (Lk. 1:130).
=> He shared the birth of the Messiah with Mary (Lk. 1:26f). □

VIII. *Luke 01:20-22 The Act of Discipline*

They were parents who had to be disciplined by God. Zechariah had failed to believe God; therefore, he had to be disciplined and taught to grow in trust more and more.

1. Zechariah had asked for a sign. He had let his tongue speak instead of his heart. Therefore, God gave him a sign — the sign of stopping his tongue during the nine months before John was born.
2. Zechariah had failed to receive the Word of God. Therefore, God took away his ability to share the Word with men.
3. Zechariah had spoken words of distrust and unbelief; therefore, God saved him from speaking any more words of distrust and unbelief.

Thought 1. Every true child of God knows the discipline of God's hand. His discipline differs with each of us, but each of us can recognize His discipline nevertheless (see Heb. 12:5-13).

Heb 12:5-6 *And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.”*

Rev 3:19 *Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.*

Deu 8:5 *Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you.*

Psa 94:12 *Blessed is the man you discipline, O Lord, the man you teach from your law.*

Prov 3:11-12 *My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.*

Jer 10:24 *Correct me, LORD, but only with justice - not in your anger, lest you reduce me to nothing.*

Thought 2. God will not allow man to disbelieve and distrust forever. The day is coming when he will stop all disbelief and distrust just as He did with Zechariah.

Note that Zechariah tarried in the temple much longer than usual. The people became restless, wondering what had happened. When he came out, he was supposed to lead the people in a benediction, but he was unable to speak. All he could do was motion with his hand. Note a significant lesson: the people could tell Zechariah had been in the presence of God. They thought he had seen a vision. Despite Zechariah’s unbelief, he had still lived a faithful life before God; therefore, God still met him and gave His promise to Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Thought 1. What hope for us all, even when our faith is weak!

IX. Luke 01:23–25 God Fulfilling His Promise

They were parents who saw God fulfil His promise. But note: these parents did two things that reveal why God was able to bless them.

1. They were responsible. Zechariah was sick; he had lost his voice completely. Yet he fulfilled his duties despite being disciplined with the infirmity. He did what he could, responsibly and faithfully. What an example!
2. They withdrew into the presence of God. After Zechariah completed his duties, he and his dear wife returned home. Of course, Zechariah would stick close to home, walking in meditation and prayer because of his experience and being unable to talk with others. But note especially Elizabeth’s behaviour. She hid herself for five months. Why? For the same reason any of us would withdraw after being visited by such an angelic being with so great a message. She needed time alone with God to absorb all

that was happening and to prepare herself for the rearing of one who was destined to be so greatly used by God.

Note how the thought that she was hiding her pregnancy from the public is inaccurate. She hid herself only for the first five months of her pregnancy. She became public after the five months (see v. 39-40, 57).

Thought 1. Note a crucial point. The call to special service necessitates a period of preparation, especially the preparation of oneself in the presence of God. Time alone with God for meditation and prayer over God's call is essential.

Joel 2:12-13 *'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.' Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.*

Heb 10:22 *Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*

James 4:8 *Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.*

James 5:13 *Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.*

Psa 34:18 *The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

Psa 57:1 *Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed. ■*