

The Birth of John the Baptist **Luke 1:57-80**

We've called this series 'Meet Jesus', because that's Luke's intention in writing this book: that all of us, starting with Theophilus, would encounter Jesus for ourselves. And that's what we need. You don't need more religion, or more morality, what we need is to encounter Jesus Christ. And last week it was two ladies, Elizabeth and Mary – this week we get to see a man, Zechariah, responding to the coming of Jesus.

Luke 1:57-80

It's Ok to Say No:

Now, I've attended a few births in my time, and some of them stick in my mind. There was the one where the father was obviously a rugby fan and he was stood by his wife's bed wearing a rugby top, and as her contractions reached their peak and the time came to push it was as if he was a scrum half controlling the scrum on the opposition's try line – push, push. And then the ball came out and it was if he'd scored a try!

Well, the scenes of jubilation that Luke records here beat even that, because this was a longed for baby and Zechariah and Elizabeth's friends and relations knew it and when this little boy was finally born, the town erupts in this spontaneous outpouring of joy. Every one knew, as Luke says in v58, that 'the Lord had shown great mercy' to this couple. Literally Luke says, God had magnified his mercy to her.

And in their joy the wider family and the neighbours try and name the boy after his dad Zechariah. Now, it's amazing how everyone has a view on what you should call your baby. If you haven't had children, you've yet to experience this joy, because once it becomes obvious you're pregnant, everyone starts asking you, 'have you got a name yet? - because I really like the name Maverick.' And you think –thanks for telling me! And once your baby's born, as a father, you have to make the calls to your parents, and you phone your mother and you tell her she has a granddaughter –her first – and the first question she asks is 'and what have you called her?' and you tell her 'we've called her Naomi' and there's this silence on the end of the phone which is eventually followed by 'well, I rather liked the name Daisy' and you're sat there thinking 'but there's no Daisy in the Bible mother'.

And this crowd of well-wishers want Elizabeth to call her baby Zechariah. But Elizabeth's response is wonderful, she simply says 'no'. 'He's not going to be called Zechariah, he's going to be called John.' She knew what had gone on between the angel and Zechariah in the temple, and she was determined they would obey God.

Church, there are times when it's ok to say 'no'. More than that, there are times when you must say no. Those of you who are parents, if you want to raise your kids to love and honour and obey God, there will be times when you need to resist the advice and input of others, even well meaning friends and family and say 'no, we're not doing that'. It's ok to say no and obey God, regardless of the fall-out.

Now young people, sometimes your parents will say 'no' to something you really want to do. And to you that decision just looks totally random and stupid, because none of your friends' parents are saying no, and you'll get frustrated and think 'why are we the ones who always have to be different?' Listen, just like Elizabeth had to say 'no' when everyone else was saying 'yes', because she wanted to obey God, so your parents are simply trying to do the same, and they do so because they want your best. In fact, the parents you should worry about are the ones who say 'yes' all the time.

But this isn't just about parents. We're all surrounded by Elizabeth's friends and relations: by well-meaning people who, without knowing or intending it, will encourage you to deviate from what God has said. They may be your work colleagues, your college friends, your wider family, may even be friends from church. Because the people around Elizabeth weren't drug dealers or pimps, they were her friends, and they're rejoicing with her, and there's a party atmosphere and this is good, clean stuff, but still the temptation came to disobey God and to be swept along by the crowd. And despite the fact that she was probably exhausted and in the party atmosphere her guard may have been down, she says really firmly, 'no'.

It's ok to say no. It's ok to take a stand even among friends. It is better to be different than to disobey. It may be about what you do or don't do on a night out, it might be about not joining in a conversation that is unhelpful and gossipy, it might be about some business practice that is just a bit grey. If you want to obey God, sometimes you are going to have to say no, and that's ok.

So having failed to persuade Elizabeth, the friends turn their attention to Zechariah.

Learning the Lesson

Zechariah was struck dumb by God because he didn't believe Gabriel's word that Elizabeth would have a baby. And in his unbelief he asked for a sign to prove it, and he got his sign. And I think being put into silence is a pretty effective form of discipline, especially when you have four daughters. Su and I, we like quiet, and into our quiet life have come these four loud, laughing, girly-talking daughters who see it as their responsibility to fill the vacuum of our quiet. So we reckon that what's good for the angel Gabriel is good for us, and when it gets too much we put them into silence and it's golden. Sadly it's only for 5 minutes, Elizabeth got 9 months of peace and quiet.

And in v62 Luke says 'and they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called.' And Zechariah calls for a writing tablet and he writes down 'His name is John.' Elizabeth said 'he *shall* be called John' -future tense, but Zechariah says 'He *is* called John' – present tense. I've learnt my lesson, Zechariah says, when God says He's going to do something He means it. And before my boy was conceived God said His name would be John, so it's already sorted, he's already got a name and it's John.

And with that, Zechariah's time of discipline ends. He's learnt his lesson.

Now, have you ever said something and instantaneously regretted it? You say something and as the words leave your mouth you just wish you could take them back? I had a friend who used to put his foot in it so often that he said that the only reason he opened his mouth was to change feet. And if God were to deal with you and me like he dealt with Zechariah we'd spend most of our lives in silence.

So why did God take this so seriously? Why did Zechariah get put into silence for 9 months for what might seem like one slip of the tongue? Well, just think about what God was tasking Zechariah to do. He was tasked with raising John the Baptist, who Jesus would later say was the greatest man who ever lived, the last of the Old Testament prophets who was to prepare the way for Jesus. And Zechariah's response to Gabriel displayed unbelief in his heart. And then ask yourself, what was it that Zechariah learnt the hard way during his period of enforced silence that he would make sure John learnt the easy way? What would he pass on to his boy from this experience? John: when God speaks to you, believe it. When God calls you, obey Him. John, take every word of God seriously. And finally John, God is gracious, because I deserved far worse.

Zechariah has learnt to trust God and take Him at His word, he's learnt that what God says, He does. And for him now there's no debate what this little baby boy is going to get called: 'His name is John', which means The Lord is Gracious and every word of God is trustworthy and will come to pass.

For Elizabeth the temptation to stray from God's path came during a party, for Zechariah the lessons to be learnt about trusting God's word came during a time of affliction. And there may be times when God sees fit to take you through a period when He seems absent, when you feel sidelined, when opposition and difficulty come your way. And it may be that it's then that your loving heavenly Father wants to teach you something and put something into your heart and your life that you won't be able to learn any other way.

In 2 Chronicles 28:22 the Chronicler records King Ahaz's response to the problems he faced of invasion and hostile aggression from other nations: 'In the time of his distress he became yet more faithless to the Lord.' Adversity and trial can push you one of two ways: it can make you harden your heart to God – I don't deserve to be treated this way. Or it can humble you before God: God, I may not understand what you're doing but I trust you that it is for my good, and I hold firm to the truth that you are faithful to your word and what you say you will do. It's the choice between an Ahaz and a Zechariah.

And instead of becoming more faithless, the first thing Zechariah does when he gets his voice back is praise God: v64: 'And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.' Now those of us who aren't very good at French, aren't there some days when you just find it so frustrating when you don't seem able to communicate? Well, here's a man who has been put into silence for 9 months, with all the frustration that must have brought, but when he finally gets the chance to speak he doesn't cuss, he doesn't blame God, he doesn't think 'you can't treat me like this'. His mouth is opened and he blesses

God. Zechariah has come to see the hand of God in it all. He has learnt the lesson he needed to learn and his heart overflows in blessing.

Church, don't resent the hard times, don't harden your heart or become embittered against God during the hard times. Trust Him, humble yourself under Him and bless Him that He knows what He's doing. But remember: Zechariah doesn't do this out of his own strength and you can't either. In v67 Luke says that 'Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied'. It is only as we allow God the Holy Spirit to teach us, and refine us and work upon our characters and bear His fruit in our lives that we can respond like that when trouble comes our way.

Making Much of Jesus

My mother has two wonderful sisters, my aunts and when the three of them get together can they talk! They will talk about golf and about their blood pressure and what medication they're on. And if it were possible to get repetitive strain injury of the jaw, they would suffer from it. But what really sets them off are their families as they try and outdo one another with the exploits of their children, which recently has been hard on my mother who has gone from having a son who's a doctor – top of the pile – to a pastor – bottom of the heap.

But here is Zechariah and his little baby son is before him, and he knows the calling God has placed on this little boy's life and he gets a chance to speak about his hopes and his dreams for his boy and what's the first thing he talks about? It's Jesus. And only after he has marvelled at what God is going to do through Jesus does he turn to what his son John will do, and once he's done that he immediately goes back to talking about Jesus.

Now, we love our families and our children, but if you put them before Jesus, they will become an idol in your heart and that will mess them up and you up. It is by loving God with all our heart and giving Him the ultimate place, and making much of Him - and raising our kids to do the same- that you and I can love our families even more. Because that love and devotion to Jesus Christ is not to the exclusion of our families. Having blessed God for Messiah's coming, in v76-77 Zechariah prophesies over his son and speaks about his ministry of preparation, giving people the knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of their sins and teaching them the tender mercy of God. He speaks that out over his son. You see, John doesn't suffer because Zechariah puts Jesus first, rather John basks in the overflow of blessing that comes from a father who puts Jesus first. You've got to get the order right

And filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah starts making much about Jesus. In v69 he blesses God because He 'has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David.' Zechariah realises that through Jesus God is going to fulfil his promise to David – Israel's greatest king - that one of David's offspring would rule as King forever.

But it's not just for David or even just for Israel. In the Holy Spirit Zechariah realises that Jesus is going to fulfil God's covenant promise to Abraham: v72-3 'to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the

oath that he swore to our father Abraham'. Now what was the promise that God made to Abraham? Well, it's in Genesis 12:3: 'I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' And Zechariah sees it: 'this isn't just about Israel, it's about the world!' Which means that whatever nation you are from, this includes you.

And in v70 it dawns on Zechariah that Jesus is the culmination of everything that 'God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old.' Notice he doesn't say that God spoke through the mouths, but the mouth of the prophets. He realises that all along all the Old Testament prophets were speaking with a single voice and pointing forward to this moment, the coming of Messiah Jesus. David, Abraham, all the Old Testament prophets: it's all going to be fulfilled in Jesus. No wonder he chooses to speak about Jesus: Jesus towers over everyone else.

But, if you tapped the average person in the street on the shoulder and asked them the question 'why did Jesus come?' most people wouldn't have a clue. And if you asked a theologian that question they'd give you a thick, rather dull textbook for an answer that would put you to sleep. But speaking by the Holy Spirit Zechariah answers it in just a couple of sentences: v71 'that we should be saved from our enemies' and v74 'that we being delivered from the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.' That's why Jesus came. To save us from our enemies, that we might serve God fearlessly.

But who are your enemies? You see if you get your enemies wrong you'll spend your life fighting the wrong kind of battles. And you can think that your enemy is your school-teacher, or your boss, or your colleague, or the system, or those politicians. But those aren't your real enemies. Our real enemies are spiritual and they are both internal and external. Paul says in Ephesians 6 that our battle isn't against flesh and blood. Our external enemies are unseen powers of wickedness and darkness. But we also face an internal battle against our indwelling bent to sin.

Now Zechariah doesn't tell us how Jesus is going to deliver us from those twin oppressors, the Holy Spirit doesn't reveal that to him. But standing this side of Jesus we can see it all: and Jesus, the Messiah, brings about this deliverance by being crucified and by dying in our place. And by paying the price for our sin he has freed us from the penalty of sin, and broken the claim of the powers of wickedness over us, so that Paul can say in Colossians 2:15 that at the cross Jesus 'disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in Him.' And in that same sacrifice of Himself, the power of sin in our lives is broken, as Paul says in Romans 6:6 'we know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.' So Zechariah was right. In Jesus we are delivered from our enemies: neither sin nor satan can hold us under their dominion.

But for what purpose? Does he deliver us so we can go on living to please ourselves? Saved, but indistinguishable from the world around us? No! Zechariah

says the Messiah will deliver us so that now, instead of serving our enemies, we might serve God – fearlessly.

If you're a Christian, you've been saved for a purpose. And that purpose is higher than to live for yourself, or the American dream. God has sent Jesus, the Messiah, to rescue and redeem and gather to Himself a people from every nation who will serve Him without fear; who will glorify Him and worship Him and make much of Him. And we can live for any number of other visions or dreams but if you do as Zechariah says in v79 you'll stay sitting in the darkness and the shadow of death. The very darkness that Jesus, like the sunrise from on high, has come to deliver you from. So don't waste your life serving anything else. Serve God fearlessly.

Now Luke closes this out by telling us in v80 that John 'grew and became strong in spirit' and we're going to close with this.

Still Growing Strong

John grows. He doesn't just grow physically he grows in spirit. Young guys, you can grow strong, you can workout and build your muscles and if you do you may end up with a body as good as mine, but you'll miss the point if you don't grow strong in spirit. And you do that by feeding your heart and your mind on the truth of God's word, rather than a junk food diet of TV and video games, and by setting your heart to worship God rather than yourself.

But it's not just John who grows here. This whole experience has been one of growth for his dad Zechariah. And when this whole story began, Luke told us that Zechariah and Elizabeth were good people, righteous in God's sight. So here is a guy, Zechariah, who's getting on in life, who's a good man, but he's still got room to grow, there are still lessons for him to learn. And you may think 'man, I've been a Christian for years but I've kind of stagnated, I've not continued to grow'. Well, like Zechariah, and like John, you can. Put yourself into the Holy Spirit's Bible college. Ask Him to teach you from His word, put the roots of your heart and your soul deep into the gospel, and you'll grow.