

“Zechariah & Elizabeth”

John 1:6–9; Luke 1:5–25

Zechariah and Elizabeth discover that “everything is gonna be all right” in ways they had never imagined!

Zechariah and Elizabeth had lived a long time with the disappointment of their childlessness. They were far too old to hold any hope of a baby. Yet, you see, everything was going to be all right. This is their story.



A day like no other

The temple in Jerusalem was the workplace of the priests of Israel. The priestly system was built around animal sacrifice; in the busy festivals of the Jewish year, the Jerusalem priests had their hands full, literally, keeping up with the demands of the populace. Somewhere around 6-4 BC, one of the priests was a very old man named Zechariah who was married to an equally old woman named Elizabeth. Much to their disappointment, the old couple was childless.

One day, as Zechariah’s department was fulfilling its priestly duties, the old man was chosen to enter God’s sanctuary and offer up incense.¹ This was quite an honor for Zechariah and something that he may have waited for his whole life. Nonetheless, Elizabeth and her family had to wait patiently outside.

Alone inside the sanctuary and somewhere during the middle of the ritual, the divine burst in upon Zechariah and all thoughts of the sacred ceremony were set aside. Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, stood on the right side of the altar. Zechariah was terrified. As was the necessary custom among angels, Gabriel told the old man, “Don’t be afraid.” Elizabeth’s and Zechariah’s prayers were about to be answered.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had always strived to lead holy and righteous lives. Not only was Zechariah a temple priest, Elizabeth was a descendent of Aaron, brother of Moses and the first high priest of Israel. But still, their lives had been clouded by the sadness and even disgrace of childlessness. This would have fallen especially hard on Elizabeth, as, in their world, a woman’s barrenness was seen to be a reproach from God. Now, Elizabeth was too old for there to be any possibility of a child.

But with God, the impossible becomes the possible. As the old man did his duty, an angel had appeared right in front of him, promising a child. And not just any child. Many people would rejoice at their son’s birth. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit and would lead people back to the Lord. In the spirit of Elijah, their son would make the people ready for the coming Lord.

As you might imagine, Zechariah found all this a bit hard to swallow. As many of us would, he wanted some sign that Gabriel’s message was truly from God. But doubt can be dangerous. Zechariah was struck mute for his lack of faith and would remain so until his son’s birth. When Zechariah emerged from the temple, the crowd understood that he had experienced a vision of some sort because he could do no more than make signs. Elizabeth, of course, would conceive and give birth to a male child. He would grow up to fulfill the vocation given him by God and would be called John the Baptist.

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, her relative, Mary, was visited by the angel Gabriel. At the time, Mary was engaged to a young man named Joseph. Mary would probably have been 14 or so at the time. Her engagement to Joseph would have been completely binding, so much so that had Joseph died before their marriage, Mary would have been considered a widow.

Early in her pregnancy, Mary came to visit Elizabeth, traveling from Nazareth in the north to the Judean hill country west of Jerusalem. Perhaps, Mary undertook the visit to escape the inevitable shame and derision that would fall on an unmarried, yet pregnant, village girl.

¹ In Exodus 30, God commands that the priests of Israel are to burn holy incense (a general term for aromatic plants) in front of the “holy of holies” in the temple. The smoke from the incense would protect the priests from the presence of God. (See also Leviticus 16)

But what joy we see in the first meeting of these two pregnant women, one old, the other young (Luke 1:39-45). Far from a dry recounting, Luke gives us a poignant and emotional portrait of the moments when the formidable mothers of John and Jesus meet. Darrell Bock help us see more of Elizabeth in this passage:

Elizabeth is exemplary in her response. She is the “amazed saint.” Her attitude is summarized in the question “Why am I so favored?” Here is humble amazement at being able to participate directly in God’s plan and see him at work (2 Sam 6:9; 24:21). All who have a role in God’s plan should share this wonder.

Elizabeth recognizes the unique blessedness of Mary (blessed are you among women) because of the child she bears (blessed is the child you will bear). The remark is rhetorical and should not be read as if Mary is the most blessed of all women. It means she is “very pleased” (compare Judges 5:24; Song 1:8). The attitude of Elizabeth is representative of what Luke desires in any believer. What a joy to share in the events associated with Jesus. What a joy to share life with him.

Elizabeth also reveals a second exemplary attribute, one that also is found in Mary. While reporting the leaping of John in her womb, she expresses a beatitude for Mary’s faith: “Blessed is she who has believed.” Here is the essence of response to God, to trust his word to be true and live in light of that belief. To be blessed is to be happy because God has touched one’s life. Such divine benefit rains down on those who trust him and his promises. Blessing emerges from God’s ability to bring his promises to completion, but to share the benefits, we must be confident that God does what he says. The first sign of such faith in Mary was her willingness to let God use her (v. 38). The second was her immediate (*hurried*) visit to Elizabeth, who herself served as a sign that God keeps his word and can give life (vv. 36, 39).

Theophilus and readers like him should not doubt, but rejoice and be assured that God keeps his promises. Trust and joy are two vital aspects of a successful walk with God. Elizabeth’s joy is shared by Mary, who will utter a hymn of praise to God for his gracious work on her behalf. Mary’s psalm also comes from the heart of a grateful believer.²

The Birth of John the Baptizer

By the time that Gabriel interrupts Zechariah’s incense offering, the Jews had waited hundreds of years for the arrival of their deliverer, their Messiah. Surely, many Jews had given up hope that they would ever see the decisive acts of God. Similarly, Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up hope of ever having children. But just as God burst in upon their lives, giving them a son, God would soon end the Jews’ wait and burst in upon human history, bringing it to a climax in Jesus Christ.

Just as the announcement of John’s birth precedes the announcement of his cousin’s birth, so Luke tells us of John’s birth before he tells us the story of Jesus’ birth (see Luke 1:57-80).

When Elizabeth’s baby is born, the neighbors are overjoyed. At the infant’s circumcision ceremony, he is about to be named Zechariah, after his father, when Elizabeth announces that he is to be named John. Zechariah agrees to the naming and, at that moment, his speech is restored! The story is told throughout the area causing people to wonder, “What then is this child going to be?” They know, as Luke writes, that “indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.” Having recovered his speech, Zechariah pronounces a lengthy blessing upon his son, John. John “will be called the prophet of the Most High” and “will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.”

So there you have it . . . maybe sooner, maybe later, even much later, everything is gonna be all right. It is not trite or a cliché; it is the promise of God that “all things work for good for those who love the Lord” (Romans 8:28).

² Bock, D. L. (1994). *Luke* (Lk 1:29). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.