



Elizabeth

The Mother of

John the Baptist

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Overview

ELIZABETH, MOTHER IN OLD AGE, ENCOURAGES MARY

Elizabeth's story is told in Luke 1:5-80. In societies like Israel, in which a woman's value was largely measured by her ability to bear children, to be aging and without children often led to personal hardship and public shame.

For Elizabeth, a childless old age was a painful and lonely time during which she remained faithful to God. Both Elizabeth and Zechariah came from priestly families.

For two weeks each year, Zechariah had to go to the temple in Jerusalem to attend to his priestly duties. After one of those trips, Zechariah returned home excited, but speechless.

He had to write down his good news, because he couldn't give it any other way. And what a wonderful surprise he had for his wife—their faded dream would become an exciting reality!

Soon Elizabeth became pregnant, and she knew her child was a long-hoped-for gift from God.

News traveled fast among the family. Seventy miles to the north, in Nazareth, Elizabeth's relative, Mary, also unexpectedly became pregnant.

Within days after the angel's message that she would bear the Messiah, Mary went to visit Elizabeth. They were instantly bound together by the unique gifts God had given them.

Elizabeth knew that Mary's son would be even greater than her own, for John would be the messenger for Mary's son. When the baby was born, Elizabeth insisted on his God-given name: John. Zechariah's written agreement freed his tongue, and everyone in town wondered what would become of this obviously special child.

Elizabeth whispered her praise as she cared for God's gift. Knowing about Mary must have made her marvel at God's timing. Things had worked out even better than she could have planned.

An angel appeared to Zechariah the priest.

Luke 1:5-80

It all begins with a Jewish priest, Zechariah, who lived when Herod was king of Judea. Zechariah was a member of the priestly order of Abijah. His wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and now they were both very old.

One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary and burn incense in the Lord's presence. While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying Zechariah was in the sanctuary when an angel of the Lord appeared, standing to the right of the incense altar.

Zechariah was overwhelmed with fear. But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! For God has heard your prayer, and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son! And you are to name him John.

You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice with you at his birth, for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or hard liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth.

And he will persuade many Israelites to turn to the Lord their God. He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah, the prophet of old. He will precede the coming of the Lord, preparing the people for his arrival. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will change disobedient minds to accept godly wisdom."

Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years."

Then the angel said, "I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this good news!

And now, since you didn't believe what I said, you won't be able to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly come true at the proper time."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah to come out, wondering why he was taking so long. When he finally did come out, he couldn't speak to them. Then they realized from his gestures that he must have seen a vision in the Temple sanctuary.

He stayed at the Temple until his term of service was over, and then he returned home. Soon afterward his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went into seclusion for five months. "How kind the Lord is!" she exclaimed. "He has taken away my disgrace of having no children!"

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David.

Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"

Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. "Don't be frightened, Mary," the angel told her, "for God has decided to bless you! You will become pregnant and have a son, and you are to name him Jesus.

He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

Mary asked the angel, "But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin."

The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.

What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she's already in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true." And then the angel left.

A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, "You are blessed by God above all other women, and your child is blessed. What an honor this is, that the mother of my Lord should visit me!

When you came in and greeted me, my baby jumped for joy the instant I heard your voice! You are blessed, because you believed that the Lord would do what he said."

Mary responded:

"Oh, how I praise the Lord.

How I rejoice in God my Savior!

For he took notice of his lowly servant girl,

And now generation after generation

Will call me blessed.

Or he, the Mighty One, is holy,

And he has done great things for me.

His mercy goes on from generation to generation,

To all who fear him
His mighty arm does tremendous things!
How he scatters the proud and haughty ones!
He has taken princes from their thrones
And exalted the lowly.

He has satisfied the hungry with good things
And sent the rich away with empty hands.
And how he has helped his servant Israel!
He has not forgotten his promise to be merciful.
For he promised our ancestors—Abraham and his children—
To be merciful to them forever."

Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months and then went back to her own home.

Now it was time for Elizabeth's baby to be born, and it was a boy. The word spread quickly to her neighbors and relatives that the Lord had been very kind to her, and everyone rejoiced with her.

When the baby was eight days old, all the relatives and friends came for the circumcision ceremony. They wanted to name him Zechariah, after his father. But Elizabeth said, "No! His name is John!"

"What?" they exclaimed. "There is no one in all your family by that name." So they asked the baby's father, communicating to him by making gestures.

He motioned for a writing tablet, and to everyone's surprise he wrote, "His name is John!" Instantly Zechariah could speak again, and he began praising God.

Wonder fell upon the whole neighborhood, and the news of what had happened spread throughout the Judean hills. Everyone who heard about it reflected on these events and asked, "I wonder what this child will turn out to be? For the hand of the Lord is surely upon him in a special way."

Then his father, Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and gave this prophecy:

"Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited his people and redeemed them. He has sent us a mighty Savior from the royal line of his servant David, just as he promised through his holy prophets long ago.

Now we will be saved from our enemies

And from all who hate us.

He has been merciful to our ancestors

By remembering his sacred covenant with them,

The covenant he gave to our ancestor Abraham.

We have been rescued from our enemies,

So we can serve God without fear,

In holiness and righteousness forever.

"And you, my little son,

Will be called the prophet of the Most High,

Because you will prepare the way for the Lord.

You will tell his people how to find salvation

Through forgiveness of their sins.

Because of God's tender mercy,
The light from heaven is about to break upon us,
Give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
And to guide us to the path of peace."

John grew up and became strong in spirit. Then he lived out in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel.

Scriptural Understanding:

A Jewish priest was a minister of God who worked at the temple managing its upkeep, teaching the people the Scriptures, and directing the worship services. At this time there were about 20,000 priests throughout the country—far too many to minister in the temple at one time. Therefore the priests were divided into 24 separate groups of about 1,000 each, according to David's directions (1 Chron. 24:3-19).

Zechariah was a member of the Abijah division, on duty this particular week. Each morning a priest was to enter the Holy Place in the temple and burn incense.

Lots were cast to decide who would enter the sacred room, and one day the lot fell to Zechariah. But it was not by chance that Zechariah was on duty and that he was chosen that day to enter the Holy Place—perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

God was guiding the events of history to prepare the way for Jesus to come to earth.

Zechariah and Elizabeth didn't merely go through the motions in following God's laws; they backed up their outward compliance with inward obedience.

Unlike the religious leaders whom Jesus called hypocrites, Zechariah and Elizabeth did not stop with the letter of the law. Their obedience was from the heart, and that is why they are called “upright in the sight of God.”

Incense was burned in the temple twice daily. When the people saw the smoke from the burning incense, they prayed. The smoke drifting heavenward symbolized their prayers ascending to God’s throne.

Angels are spirit beings who live in God’s presence and do his will. Only two angels are mentioned by name in Scripture—Michael and Gabriel—but there are many who act as God’s messengers. Here, Gabriel (Luke 1:19) delivered a special message to Zechariah. This was not a dream or a vision. The angel appeared in visible form and spoke audible words to the priest.

Zechariah, while burning incense on the altar, was also praying, perhaps for a son or for the coming of the Messiah. In either case, his prayer was answered. He would soon have a son, who would prepare the way for the Messiah. God answers prayer in his own way and in his own time.

John means “the LORD is gracious,” and *Jesus* means “the LORD saves.” Both names were prescribed by God, not chosen by human parents. Throughout the Gospels, God acts graciously and saves his people. He will not withhold salvation from anyone who sincerely comes to him.

. John was set apart for special service to God. He may have been forbidden to drink wine as part of the Nazirite vow, an ancient vow of consecration to God (see Numbers 6:1-8). Samson (Judges 13) was under the Nazirite vow, and Samuel may have been also (1 Samuel 1:11).

This is Luke’s first mention of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity; Luke refers to the Holy Spirit more than any other Gospel writer. Because Luke also wrote the book of Acts, we know he was thoroughly informed about the work of the Holy Spirit. Luke recognized and emphasized the Holy Spirit’s work in directing the founding of Christianity and in guiding the early church. The presence of the Spirit is God’s gift given to the entire church at Pentecost. Prior to that, God’s Spirit was given to the faithful for special tasks. We need the Holy Spirit’s help to do God’s work effectively.

John's role was to be almost identical to that of an Old Testament prophet—to encourage people to turn away from sin and back to God. John is often compared to the great prophet Elijah, who was known for standing up to evil rulers (Malachi 4:5; Matthew 11:14; Matthew 17:10-13). See Elijah's Profile.

In preparing people for the Messiah's arrival, John would do "heart transplants." He would take stony hearts and exchange them for hearts that were soft, pliable, trusting, and open to change. (See Ezekiel 11:19-20 and Ezekiel 36:25-29 for more on "heart transplants.") Are you as open to God as you should be? Or do you need a change of heart?

When told he would have a son, Zechariah doubted the angel's word. From Zechariah's human perspective, his doubts were understandable—but with God, anything is possible. Although Zechariah and Elizabeth were past the age of childbearing, God gave them a child. It is easy to doubt or misunderstand what God wants to do in our lives.

Even God's people sometimes make the mistake of trusting their intellect or experience rather than God. When tempted to think that one of God's promises is impossible, remember his work throughout history. God's power is not confined by narrow perspective or bound by human limitations. Trust him completely.

Zechariah thought it incredible that he and his wife, at their old age, could conceive a child. But what God promises, he delivers.

And God delivers *on time!* You can have complete confidence that God will keep his promises. Their fulfillment may not be the next day, but they will be "at their proper time." If you are waiting for God to answer some request or to fill some need, remain patient. No matter how impossible God's promises may seem, what he has said in his Word will come true at the right time.

The people were waiting outside for Zechariah to come out and pronounce the customary blessing upon them as found in Numbers 6:24-26.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were both faithful people, and yet they were suffering. Some Jews at that time did not believe in a bodily resurrection, so their hope of immortality was in their children.

In addition, children cared for their parents in their old age and added to the family's financial security and social status. Children were considered a blessing, and childlessness was seen as a curse.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had been childless for many years, and at this time they were too old to expect any change in their situation. They felt humiliated and hopeless. But God was waiting for the right time to encourage them and take away their disgrace.

Gabriel appeared not only to Zechariah and to Mary but also to the prophet Daniel more than 500 years earlier (Daniel 8:15-17; Daniel 9:21). Each time Gabriel appeared, he brought important messages from God.

Nazareth, Joseph's and Mary's hometown, was a long way from Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life and worship. Located on a major trade route, Nazareth was frequently visited by Gentile merchants and Roman soldiers. It was known for its independent and aloof attitude.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem but grew up in Nazareth. Nevertheless, the people of Nazareth would reject him as the Messiah (Luke 4:22-30).

Mary was young, poor, female—all characteristics that, to the people of her day, would make her seem unusable by God for any major task.

But God chose Mary for one of the most important acts of obedience he has ever demanded of anyone. You may feel that your ability, experience, or education makes you an unlikely candidate for God's service. Don't limit God's choices. He can use you if you trust him

God's favor does not automatically bring instant success or fame. His blessing on Mary, the honor of being the mother of the Messiah, would lead to much pain: her peers would ridicule her; her fiance would come close to leaving her; her son would be rejected and murdered.

But through her son would come the world's only hope, and this is why Mary has been praised by countless generations as the young girl who "found favor with God." Her submission was part of God's plan to bring about our salvation.

If sorrow weighs you down and dims your hope, think of Mary and wait patiently for God to finish working out his plan.

Jesus, a Greek form of the Hebrew name *Joshua*, was a common name meaning "the LORD saves." Just as Joshua had led Israel into the Promised Land (see Joshua 1:1-2), so Jesus would lead his people into eternal life.

The symbolism of his name was not lost on the people of his day, who took names seriously and saw them as a source of power. In Jesus' name people were healed, demons were banished, and sins were forgiven.

Centuries earlier, God had promised David that David's kingdom would last forever (2 Samuel 7:16). This promise was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, a direct descendant of David, whose reign will continue throughout eternity.

Jesus was born without the sin that entered the world through Adam. He was born holy, just as Adam was created sinless. In contrast to Adam, who disobeyed God, Jesus obeyed God and was thus able to face sin's consequences in our place and make us acceptable to God (Romans 5:14-19).

Apparently the Holy Spirit told Elizabeth that Mary's child was the Messiah because Elizabeth called her young relative "the mother of my Lord" as she greeted her.

As Mary rushed off to visit her relative, she must have been wondering if the events of the last few days were real. Elizabeth's greeting must have strengthened her faith.

Mary's pregnancy may have seemed impossible, but her wise relative believed in the Lord's faithfulness and rejoiced in Mary's blessed condition.

Even though she herself was pregnant with a long-awaited son, Elizabeth could have envied Mary, whose son would be even greater than her own. Instead she was filled with joy that the mother of her Lord would visit her. Have you ever envied people whom God has apparently singled out for special blessing?

A cure for jealousy is to rejoice with those people, realizing that God uses his people in ways best suited to his purpose.

This song is often called the *Magnificent*, the first word in the Latin translation of this passage. Mary's song has often been used as the basis for choral music and hymns.

Like Hannah, the mother of Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1-10), Mary glorified God in song for what he was going to do for the world through her. Notice that in both songs, God is pictured as a champion of the poor, the oppressed, and the despised.

When Mary said, "From now on all generations will call me blessed," was she being proud? No, she was recognizing and accepting the gift God had given her.

If Mary had denied her incredible position, she would have been throwing God's blessing back at him. Pride is refusing to accept God's gifts or taking credit for what God has done; humility is accepting the gifts and using them to praise and serve God.

Don't deny, belittle, or ignore your gifts. Thank God for them and use them to his glory.

God kept his promise to Abraham to be merciful to God's people forever (Genesis 22:16-18).

Christ's birth fulfilled the promise, and Mary understood this. She was not surprised when her special son eventually announced that he was the Messiah. She had known Jesus' mission from before his birth.

Some of God's promises to Israel are found in 2 Samuel 22:50-51; Psalm 89:2-4; Psalm 103:17-18; Micah 7:18-20.

Because travel was not easy, long visits were customary. Mary must have been a great help to Elizabeth, who was experiencing the discomforts of a first pregnancy in old age.

The circumcision ceremony was an important event to the family of a Jewish baby boy. God commanded circumcision when he was beginning to form his holy nation (Genesis 17:4-14), and he reaffirmed it through Moses (Leviticus 12:1-3).

This ceremony was a time of joy when friends and family members celebrated the baby's becoming part of God's covenant nation.

Family lines and family names were important to the Jews. The people naturally assumed the child would receive Zechariah's name or at least a family name. Thus they were surprised that both Elizabeth and Zechariah wanted to name the boy John, as the angel had told them to do (see Luke 1:13).

Zechariah's relatives talked to him by gestures, because he was apparently deaf as well as speechless and had not heard what his wife had said.

Zechariah praised God with his first words after months of silence. In a song that is often called the *Benedictus* after the first words in the Latin translation of this passage, Zechariah prophesied the coming of a Savior who would redeem his people, and he predicted that his son John would prepare the Messiah's way.

All the Old Testament prophecies were coming true—no wonder Zechariah praised God! The Messiah would come in Zechariah's lifetime, and his son had been chosen to pave the way.

The Jews were eagerly awaiting the Messiah, but they thought he would come to save them from the powerful Roman Empire. They were ready for a military Savior, but not for a peaceful Messiah who would conquer sin.

This was God's promise to Abraham to bless all peoples through him (see Genesis 12:3). It would be fulfilled through the Messiah, Abraham's descendant.

Zechariah had just recalled hundreds of years of God's sovereign work in history, beginning with Abraham and going on into eternity.

Then, in tender contrast, he personalized the story. His son had been chosen for a key role in the drama of the ages. Although God has unlimited power, he chooses to work through frail humans who begin as helpless babies.

Don't minimize what God can do through those who are faithful to him.

Why did John live out in the desert? Prophets used the isolation of the uninhabited desert to enhance their spiritual growth and to focus their message on God.

By being in the desert, John remained separate from the economic and political powers so that he could aim his message against them.

He also remained separate from the hypocritical religious leaders of his day. His message was different from theirs, and his life proved it.

Life Application

God worked in an “impossible” situation—Zechariah’s wife was barren—to bring about the fulfillment of all the prophecies concerning the Messiah. If we want to have our prayers answered, we must be open to what God can do in impossible situations. And we must wait for God to work in his way, in his time.

We too need to remember that God is in control of every situation. When did you last pause to recognize God’s timing in the events of your life?

Key verses: “But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!” (Luke 1:43-45).

To ask Jesus to come into your heart please pray this Prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, I believe you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I ask you to forgive me of my sins and coming into my heart. I accept you as savior and will follow you as Lord. Amen.

References:

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Additional comments and charts are taken from: *Life Application Study Bible*. Illinois: Tyndale House 2007. Print