

Luke 1:56-66
The Birth of John the Baptist

Child prodigies are intriguing. At the end of the Star Wars movie “Phantom Menace,” Senator Palpatine looks at the young Anakin Skywalker and says “we will be watching your career with great interest.” In this galaxy, Renaissance figure Giovanni Pico della Mirandola could speak twenty-two languages by the age of 18. More recently, Nathan Leopold spoke at the age of four months, mastered 15 languages, and had an I.Q. of 210. However, he is most famous for his murder of Bobby Franks with partner Richard Loeb in 1924.

In this passage, Luke continues to weave together the narratives of the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ - the forerunner of the Messiah, and the Messiah, Himself. Today we look at the birth of another child of whom great things were expected, John the Baptist, who was, according to Maximus of Turin, “born for prophecy, murdered for truth.”

Fulfillment of the Promise

“Mary stayed with her about three months” indicates that Mary likely stayed until the baby was born. The young girl chose to minister to the older Elizabeth, and must have been a blessing, as there is no indication any others were there to help (that is, Elizabeth had only Zacharias), though no doubt others in the village would have been available. This despite the fact that Mary was dealing with her own pregnancy at this time.

“The time had come” indicates the beginning of the turning point in human history. God’s plan of redemptive history has a timetable. It had been promised. It had been prophesied. It is specific, not random. It is subject to the will of God, not human events. We worship a God who has a plan and Whose plan cannot be thwarted.

We also worship a God Who keeps His promises. God’s will cannot be undone by circumstances, human actions, the powers of darkness, or anything else. Throughout history God has been understood to be truthful.

Numbers 23:19, “God is not a man, that He should lie,
Nor a son of man, that He should repent;
Has He said, and will He not do it?
Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?”

Hebrews 10:23, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful,”

That we have a God who is all powerful and perfectly truthful means that when He says a thing will come to pass, it will come to pass. He cannot lie, and He cannot be forestalled. Each of us can give examples from our own lives of this truth, and that should give us great confidence for the future.

That John was born a healthy baby to an older woman should not be overlooked or taken for granted. Both infant mortality and maternal mortality were very high in the ancient world. In as rudimentary and primitive an environment as Palestine in the 1st century, odds of both surviving were about 50%.

The neighborhood came out to celebrate. They heard that “the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her” and rejoiced. This would not have been unusual in a small village, and Elizabeth’s unique condition (even presuming she had not told anyone about the visit from the angel) would have gained attention.

It is important not to fear emotion. In Romans 12:15, we are commanded to “rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.” Christ, Himself, went to a wedding and wept at a grave. It is surprising the difference in energy between a church service and a baseball game.

The Place of Ritual

“On the eighth day” was a command according to Jewish law. Leviticus 12:3, “On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.”

It was also a sign of the covenant with Abraham, Genesis 17:9-12, “ God said further to Abraham, “⁹Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. “¹⁰This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. ¹²And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants.”

The circumcision was usually performed by the father and, according to later tradition, had to be witnessed by at least ten people. The idea of naming the child on the same day is not required by OT law, but perhaps grew out of the tradition of Moses who was circumcised and named on the eighth day and Abraham who received a new name from God when he was circumcised. Perhaps it was simply a village celebration, and the occasion was appropriate to announce the name of the child.

“They were going to call him Zacharias, after his father” was a common custom (though using the grandfather’s name was more so). In Jewish culture, names were specific and intentional and were meant to convey meaning. Abraham “father of many,” Esau “hairy,” Jacob “one who grabs the heel,” Samuel “asked for,” Elijah “Yahweh is God” are examples.

Rituals are significant moments in religious life, but ought not to control us. There is no indication in either the OT or Jewish tradition that if a child died before he was circumcised he was damned. Throughout church history ritual increased in significance until the Protestant Reformation. Today we recognize the ordinances of baptism and communion, but acknowledge that neither of these impart saving grace. Nevertheless, they are significant events and are to be celebrated and appreciated.

What’s in a Name

When told to name the child after his father, Elizabeth responds emphatically. “No indeed” is the ancient equivalent of “no way” or “over my dead body.” Instead, she insisted that the child be called John. No doubt Zacharias had told her what the angel had said.

Elizabeth was going against her culture. It was simply not appropriate not to name a child after some significant family member. Calling her to account, those around insisted that Zacharias be consulted. There will always be plenty of people to discourage us from doing what God requires.

That they made signs to him indicates that he was probably deaf as well as unable to speak. Asking for a writing tablet (probably a tablet of wax which he would scratch with a stylus), Zacharias clearly wrote "His name is John."

The Response to the Promise

"At once his mouth was opened" and Zacharias began to speak. Is it surprising that the first thing Zacharias said was praise to God?

"At once" indicates the miraculous nature of the event. The restoration of his voice was not the result of a long-term healing process. He had not spoken for nine months and now he could speak as loudly and intelligibly as ever. God's miracles are emphatic.

It is worth appreciating the response of Zacharias. He had learned to believe God would do what He says. He had made great use of his affliction. One can imagine how often in those silent weeks and months, Zacharias pondered the consequences of his unbelief. Unable to perform his priestly duties, how often he must have promised to himself not to fail again.

We cannot escape sin. Let us take heed of this and remember to profit from our mistakes and the consequences they produce. God disciplines those He loves, and we ought to appreciate the compliment. Proverbs 3:12, "For whom the LORD loves He reproves,
Even as a father, the son in whom, he delights."

As a consequence of this miracle, "fear came on all those living around them." These things began to be talked about for miles around. What things? The pregnancy of Elizabeth perhaps (she may have stayed in seclusion and not mentioned the angel or the prophecy), the visit of the angel Gabriel (now that Zacharias could speak he must have told the story often), the healing of Zacharias as a confirmation of the promise of the angel. All of the details of the story were discussed about the neighboring towns. We know how quickly gossip spreads, and this bit of news had to do with the coming of the Messiah.

"What then will this child turn out to be?" indicates the excitement generated by these promises kept. Surely some were skeptical. Some must have been reluctant to believe. It would take thirty years or so before this all began to be fulfilled. Many, no doubt, never lived to see the day when John the Baptist began to preach. But perhaps there were some, youthful at the time, who saw John baptize Jesus and remembered the day he was born.

"For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him." We can ask for no greater blessing for a child. To be sure, we want our children to do well in school and to be strong and healthy. We want them to grow to maturity and find love and good employment. But there is "no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth," 3 John 4 is true for any godly parent.

Take Aways

Appreciate the faithfulness of your God. What He has said He will do. Your salvation is secure.

Learn from your afflictions. God has a purpose in all things.

Pray for the hand of God to be with your children -- even (perhaps especially) if they are no longer children.