

Events Associated with the Birth of a Son to Elizabeth (Lk. 1.57-80)

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<sup>57</sup> Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. <sup>58</sup> And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. <sup>59</sup> And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, <sup>60</sup> but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." <sup>61</sup> And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." <sup>62</sup> And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. <sup>63</sup> And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. <sup>64</sup> And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. <sup>65</sup> And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, <sup>66</sup> and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him. <sup>67</sup> And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, <sup>68</sup> "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people <sup>69</sup> and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, <sup>70</sup> as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, <sup>71</sup> that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; <sup>72</sup> to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, <sup>73</sup> the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us <sup>74</sup> that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, <sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. <sup>76</sup> And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, <sup>77</sup> to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, <sup>78</sup> because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high <sup>79</sup> to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." <sup>80</sup> And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

### Introduction

As we approach another large unit in the Gospel of Luke (1.57-80), we need to work our way through the details to the core ideas. What we first think is the subject may not be the subject. For example, we might want to call this narrative "the birth of a son to Elizabeth," but there is no explanation or development of this birth. We have no details such as the length of the mother's labor or how things went in the actual delivery. We just have the fact: **Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son** (1.57); the time came for her to give birth and she did. It is a fact that sets a number of events in motion. So, it seems better to use this title: "Events *associated with* the birth of a son to Elizabeth."

Furthermore, to come up with an outline, we need to put our finger on the major events that we find in this narrative, the major events that spring from the extraordinary birth by Elizabeth in her old age. The joy of the neighbors cited in 1.58, for example, is not a major occurrence since it is stated in a causal and matter of fact way, sweet and to the point; they heard and they rejoiced: **[Elizabeth] bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her** (1.57-58). Neither is the circumcision of this newborn on the eighth day a major event. We can be sure of that because Luke does not mention the *actual* circumcision. He simply records the fact that the parents presented their infant son *for* circumcision: **on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child** (1.59). The text does not say, "They circumcised him," but simply, "They came *to* circumcise him." The fact that our narrator takes us in thought into the eighth day, and right up to the moment of the circumcision of Elizabeth's son, *without telling us that the ritual was performed*, shows us that the ritual has a subordinate place in the narrative. That may surprise us in view of the importance that circumcision has in the history of redemption as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant.

Consider Genesis 17, which records the institution of the circumcision ritual, which is to be observed by Abraham and his offspring **throughout their generations** (v. 9). Interestingly, keeping God's covenant is particularized in the duty to circumcise every male; this, the Lord says, **shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you** (17.11). It is a sign but much more than a sign because the Lord states that keeping the covenant generation by generation by means of this ritual sign (17.9) **is my covenant, which you shall keep** (17.10). How should we understand that circumcision, which is a sign of the covenant, *is* the covenant? How can the sign of the covenant be the covenant? If we think generationally, we get our answer. Generation by generation, whenever a descendent of

Abraham was born and circumcised on the eighth day, that was a realization of the covenant; it was covenant fulfillment. On one hand, it was a fulfillment, an embodied fulfillment in a ritual about God's covenant keeping. It symbolized and proclaimed the good news of God's faithfulness to Abraham. The message of the sign was to this effect: "here in another descendent of Abraham is another example that shows God's covenant keeping." On the other hand, each fulfillment (each circumcision) looked forward to ultimate fulfillment in the coming of the greater Isaac, the true son of Abraham. Thus, the ritual is the covenant realized in the birth of Isaac, in the birth of Jacob, in the birth of Jacob's children, and in the birth of his children's children in all their generations. At the same time that each circumcision was a sort of "mini" realization of the covenant, each circumcision signified the promise of the final realization in the child yet to come. Thus, circumcision has a huge significance, but the text gives us nothing regarding that significance. The mentioning of it by Luke does raise our eyes to the theology of circumcision, to its teaching. So this is important context, pointing to the Abrahamic covenant, but the circumcision itself is not a major event.

So, what then are the major events of this narrative in association with the birth of a son to Elizabeth? By a process of elimination, we come finally to two things: the naming of a newborn son, and the prophesying of a once-mute father (naming and prophesying).

#### 1A. The naming of a newborn son

Clearly, it was customary to name a child in an official way at his circumcision. **59**And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, **60** but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." **61**And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." **62** And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called (1.59-62; so with Jesus in 2.21). Everyone thought that he would be named after his father, Zechariah. However, his mother declined stating that his name would be John (1.60). Noting that there are no relatives by this name, they inquired of Zechariah regarding what to call him (1.61-62), but he was unable to speak. You will remember that he had been afflicted with muteness because of his unbelief (1.13-20): **But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great before the Lord...20And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."** Accordingly, when asked about the name Elizabeth designated, Zechariah obtains a writing tablet on which to give his answer (1.63). On it he wrote: **His name is John** (1.63), the name assigned by the angel Gabriel (and thus by the Lord, 1.13, 45).

This naming caused the people to wonder; what is going on? What is happening here? Then Zechariah's **mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God** (1.64). The reversal of Zechariah's muteness is emphasized and what he said is summarized: whatever he said in particular, his words glorified God.

Because of these events, fear fell upon the neighbors of this righteous couple and news of the special child spread through all the hill country of Judea preparing the way, we might say, for the way-preparer. A wondering anticipation was laid up in the hearts of many throughout the region: **all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him** (1.66). Therefore, Luke, our narrator puts this question into the hearts of all who *read* and follow his account closely. It causes us all to wonder and ponder. The hand of God is clearly on this child, so what in the world will he be? What will his life be like? What role will he fulfill? What is God doing? These questions open the door to the prophecy of Zechariah in which they are answered. Obviously, the prophecy is the most major event.

In verse 64, we are told that Zechariah's mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed. That set the stage for the true emphasis of the account. He was now able to speak and the words he spoke blessed, praised, and glorified God. His prophecy explains why God is to be glorified and what John will be. His praise, known as the *Benedictus*, is Latin for the word blessed that begins his praise (v. 68). The blessing Zechariah gives has its focus on redemption in four ways.

1) He praises God for the fact of redemption

**Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (1.68-69).** Zechariah now has a son and this son will be a great man. So he praises God, but notably, his praise has a center and that center is not his son. He praises God for salvation that has come (the fact) and to which John is a signal by being a **horn of salvation**. God has paid Israel a visit; He has come to His temple and people. We know that this visitor is present because the Lord raised up a horn to announce His presence. Because He has come, the trumpet sound announces salvation and thus redemptive deliverance.

2) He praises God for the pattern of redemption

That is, God works out His plans for human history in the way of covenant promises and covenant keeping of those promises in stages over time. This redemption is in accord with the promises of the OT: **as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham (1.70-73).** What is the point of salvation **from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us (v. 71)?** It is important to understand this figuratively, knowing that ultimately it refers to something that is strikingly literal. That is, the promise here is not for Israel's deliverance from the Roman government and its oppression. It is a promise of spiritual deliverance now that will ultimately involve a final and decisive separation of God's people from all His and their enemies (cf. WSC 26). For the time being, the true people of God will face affliction at the hands of their enemies but God will show them His mercy according to His promise to the fathers in remembrance of His holy covenant, and in accord with the oath He swore to Abraham. This is the Lord's faithful pattern of redemption.

3) He praises God for the goal of redemption

His goal is stated clearly and pointedly in verses 74-75: **that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.** Clearly, being delivered from the enemies does not involve a role reversal in which Israel becomes the master and Rome becomes her slave. The salvation is first, for the present time, spiritual in its orientation. Slavery, for example, is not eliminated. Israelites become slaves of the Lord without fear of men. Therefore, the purpose of redemption is spiritual-service (Rom 12.1-2) that is not governed by peer pressure. It does not get its shape from the counsel of the ungodly that surround us, look at us and point us to disobedience. God redeems a people for His own possession that they may live their lives (all their days) before Him **in holiness and righteousness.**

4) He praises God for redemption with an accent on John the forerunner

In 76-80, Luke continues his praise, but now with a focus on God's tender mercy giving John the forerunner. **76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, 77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, 78 because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high 79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."** **80 And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. Amazing!**

What he will be: he will be a prophet of the Most High as the forerunner and way-preparer who will **go before the Lord to prepare his ways (1.76).**

What he will do: in this role as forerunner, John will **give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins** (1.77). Here is the negative side of the new life of holiness that is the goal of God's redemption. The salvation is for holiness beginning as it does with the forgiveness of sins. What a marvelous, familiar, and pungent truth: forgiveness, that is what salvation means in the coming of the Lord to visit His people.

Why he will do it: John will proclaim this message of salvation and give people in Israel knowledge of forgiveness of their sins because of the tender mercies of God. The people need to be prepared because they are not ready. They are in a pitiable position under the afflictions of sin and false religion. They are a disobedient people. Nonetheless, God has come to give them redemption, salvation, mercy, and thus the forgiveness of their sins. That they may know it, He gives His word through His prophet. Sunrise is occurring, the new day is dawning. Those lost in the darkness now have the morning light: **the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace** (1.78-79). It will shine from the wilderness throughout the land when this child becomes strong in spirit and makes his public appearance to Israel: **the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel** (1.80).

Application: how to praise God for His redemptive mercy (for redemption)

#### 1) Speak

Sin makes you mute, but the redemptive mercy of the Lord opens your mouths and loosens your tongues in ways that are parallel with the experience of Zechariah (1. 20, 64). This does not exclude times of silence that are appropriate; but silence is not the rule. Instead, blessing God goes hand in hand with being filled with the Spirit, with being spiritual and being Christian. Confessing faith and blessing God are marks of maturity in your Christianity. Therefore, speak from a resource of God centered meditations in your heart so that the words of your mouth may be pleasing in His sight.

#### 2) Acknowledge

Acknowledge that your Lord is worthy of praise. That is the meaning of "blessing" God. He is to be blessed. He is worthy of all glory, so acknowledge that fact straight out.

#### 3) Name

In other words, address the Lord in ways that the saints address Him according to the many names by which He reveals Himself. Here, Zechariah uses **the God of Israel**. To be sure, that means that Israel owns Him as her God, that is how godly Israelites name Him. More important, this name indicates that God has made Israel (the descendants of Abraham in all their generations) a people for His own possession for He says, ***I will be God to you: And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you*** (Gen 17.7).

#### 4) Ground

This simply means that you pray in a good biblical way when you state why it is that God is to be praised. This is an issue of content and the example here in the Benedictus is clear and extensive. Zechariah grounds his prayer fully and thoughtfully. The covenant Lord is worthy of praise because even though we are strangers wandering in the wilderness, lost, and outside of Eden, nevertheless, He pays us a visit; He comes to us where we are in the darkness of our sin, rebellion, and shame. He finds the lost, redeems them, and delivers them from the hands of their enemies. God is to be glorified because of His mercy that is tender for He sent John as His forerunner because of His tender mercy (1.78). John is God's gift of sunrise that dispels the dark shadows of death. He is worthy of praise because through the visitor, Jesus Christ the Lord,

He gives us the forgiveness of sins and knowledge of that forgiveness in the proclamation of the good news by John and Jesus. Ah, yes, the light of the gospel is a lamp for our feet that leads us “into the way of peace” (1.79). 5

5) Live

From the very beginning, from the dawning of the new day, from the sunrise of your salvation in the coming of John and Jesus, an emphasis is put on holy serving and righteous living. True faith obeys; genuine faith is not just dead talk. Instead, it speaks, yes it is not mute, but genuine faith is alive with action. How do you best bless God in all [your] days (1.75)? You do so by committing yourself to Jesus Christ the Lord as your prophet (teacher), priest (mediator), and king (ruler) to do whatever He commands.

**May we fall down before the majesty of our God with recognition of our sins and by the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, may we speak and not be mute, may we name the God of Israel as our covenant keeping Lord, and may we trust and obey Jesus for paying us a visit and giving us light in darkness and the forgiveness of our sins for the glory of the triune God, amen.**