

## **A Bible Lesson on Luke 1:5-38 (ESV<sup>1</sup>)**

**Luke 1:5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.**

Zechariah was a priest, a direct descendant of Aaron. The Jewish priests were organized into 24 divisions, at this time consisting of around 22,000 men total. Each of these divisions served in Jerusalem for 2 weeks each year. Priests were to marry only pure-blooded Israelites. Zechariah had married not only within Israel, but within the family of Aaron. Zechariah means "God has remembered." Elizabeth means "God is my oath" (God keeps His promises).

**<sup>6</sup>And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.**

These people weren't morally perfect, but they were genuinely devout, pious people, serious Jews loving God and following the Scriptures with all their hearts.

**<sup>7</sup>But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.**

Barrenness was considered a tragedy. Often it was associated with God's judgment. And it is sure that Zechariah and Elizabeth had endured a life of seemingly unanswered prayer as they agonized over having no children. As Ryle puts it, this is "one of the bitterest of sorrows" that is mentioned here. The phrase rendered "advanced in years" has been interpreted by most commentators to mean that they were in their 70's or 80's, way past child bearing age. The grace of God exempts no one from trouble, and it is ultimately for God's glory and the good of these devout people that they have endured these long years with hope unfulfilled.

**<sup>8</sup>Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty,**

**<sup>9</sup>according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.**

As a practical matter, there were more priests than there were duties in the temple. So they drew lots to see who would perform them. This offering of incense brought an ordinary priest as close as he would ever come to the Holy of Holies. Since choice of who was to serve was done by lot, some priests never had the honor of making this offering. And if one did get to make the offering, it was only once in a lifetime. (It seems that no repeats were allowed.) The point is that for an ordinary priest, the opportunity to serve in this way was likely the high point of his career.

**<sup>10</sup>And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.**

**<sup>11</sup>And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.**

**<sup>12</sup>And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.**

Zechariah "was troubled, and fear fell upon him." This was a place where no other mortal would dare to be. Zechariah wasn't expecting anyone else, and when the angel appears, there could be no doubt that is someone from the very presence of God. Zechariah had to know this immediately. And if this is a powerful messenger from the very throne of God, Zechariah cannot help but be reminded of his own frailty, unholiness, and lack of personal right to stand in the presence of that God. He fears both because of the awesome appearance of this

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being, and because of the holiness of the God he represents. Thanks be to God for the work of Christ our mediator, who gives us a place to stand before God!

**<sup>13</sup>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.**

Your prayer has been answered. This surely has a double meaning. For their entire lives, Zechariah and Elizabeth have been praying for a child. But Zechariah has just as surely just now been praying for the consolation/redemption of Israel. Being pious people, that has been a life-long longing for him and for Elizabeth's as well. They longed that God would intervene and set all things right, that Messiah would finally come. Apparently, the tense here indicates that the prayer to be answered is one that he had just now been praying. That is surely this prayer for the coming of Messiah. But now, both the payer for the fulfilment of God's promise of a Messiah and the lifetime of payers for a child are going to be answered. Elizabeth and Zechariah will have a son, and that son will announce the appearance of the Christ!

Zechariah is told he is to be given the name "John" or "Yahweh is gracious." The naming of a son was the responsibility of a Jewish father. That God steps in and prescribes the name indicates God's special calling of John.

**<sup>14</sup>And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,**

**<sup>15</sup>for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.**

John is to live a life set apart to God. He will be great in God's sight. That is what matters. He will not be great in the sight of men. Indeed his last days will be spent in Herod's dungeon and he will lose his head at the whim of a teenage girl and her evil mother. But he will be great in the sight of God. That will be evident in the way he lives, including his total abstinence from alcohol. In contrast to one out of his mind under the influence of alcohol, he'll be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth.

These things will be true "even from his mother's womb." That's really a beautiful and wonderful truth. God has His hand on our kids from before their births. His Holy Spirit can and does work in the lives of little ones. We ought never think of children as just beings on hold until they are grown up and can trust Christ. J.C. Ryle said, "We should always deal with them as responsible to God. We should never allow ourselves to suppose that they are too young to have any religion. Of course we must be reasonable in our expectations. We must not look for evidences of grace, unsuitable to their age and capacities. But we must never forget that the heart that is not too young to sin, is also not too young to be filled with the grace of God."

**<sup>16</sup>And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,**

**<sup>17</sup>and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."**

This hearkens back to Malachi's prophecies.

**Malachi 2:6 True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity.**

**Malachi 3:1 "Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.**

**Malachi 4:5 "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. <sup>6</sup>And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."**

John "will turn hearts." Ryle: " – turn them from ignorance to knowledge, from carelessness to thoughtfulness, from sin to God." This is the work of a true minister of God. It is not to say what they want to hear or will gather a large audience and big finances or will leave them singing the praises of the messenger. It is to turn heart hearts and prepare a people for God.

Now comes a completely realistic testimony to the frailness of human beings. Zechariah is a genuinely devout person, who is standing here conversing with an angel sent from the God of the universe, and yet he must ask ...

**<sup>18</sup>And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."**

Sure he and his wife are old, but exactly what more could he figure he ought to have in the way of confirmation? He's got the Old Testament accounts of the births of Isaac, Samuel, and Samson to learn from. Before him stands an angel from the very presence of God. This unbelief is at once really quite outrageous, and also completely true to the way we are. At the core of our problems are two: refusal to 1) obey and 2) take God at His word. That was the case in Genesis 3 and it's the case with Zechariah. Apparently the "I" am an old man is emphatic. And so too is the "I" in Gabriel's reply:

**<sup>19</sup>And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."**

Gabriel most or less says "*you* may be old, but *I* come from the very presence of God, ... and was sent to you to bring you this good news"! ("This is good news for the whole world and good news for you personally.")

This is the same angel that 490 years before had spoken to Daniel about how the Messiah would be mistreated.

**Daniel 9:26a And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing.**

And this Gabriel, great being that he is, counts it primary that he stands in the presence of God, that he is a servant of the LORD. His name is Gabriel/"God is my strength"/"mighty man of God"/"strength of God"/"God my hero."

**<sup>20</sup>And 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."**

There's no mistaking it, this is a sharp rebuke. God has spoken good news through what is clearly His specially appointed messenger, and Zechariah hasn't believed what he's heard. If we'll think about it clearly, we'll recognize that he's thus denied God's ability or intention to follow through with what He's plainly said He will do. That's an attack on the very nature of the Almighty. He gets 9 months of silence to think about it. This is a punishment that fits the crime. If we will not agree with the Word of God, we have nothing useful to say.

**<sup>21</sup>And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple.**

**<sup>22</sup>And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute.**

Zechariah is mute, and it seems from the latter part of the chapter that he may well also be deaf.

It's worth thinking about the life circumstances under which this wonderful revelation comes to Zechariah. Zechariah is putting one foot in front of the other in the service of God. That is true faith. He's doing the next thing that comes to him from the hand of God. He's playing his appointed part in the community of faith. He's been a faithful part of the priesthood and devout Jewish worship his whole life, treating his duties seriously, and as part of a living reality. This is not just going through the motions he's engaged in here. But he also is completely surprised by this visitation. He could not have predicted nor has any place to expect this to happen. That too is the nature of true faith. There is "ordinary" wonderful grace that is part of living consistently, taking God at His Word, and putting one foot in front of the other. Extraordinary stuff that is real like this comes completely unexpectedly. As the kids in the Narnia Chronicles learn, "Aslan is not a tame lion" ... we don't wrest from the hand of God His extraordinary goodness.

**23And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.**

**24After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying,**

**25"Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."**

This, like the birth of Abraham's son Isaac, is a wild one. This very old woman by the direct work of God is going to have a child ... a child that will be a blessing to her and to all people. Now we cut away to Nazareth.

**26In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee**

The sixth month is the sixth month after Gabriel had appeared to Zechariah, announcing the conception of John the Baptist, 3 months before the birth of John the Baptist.

God again sends the archangel Gabriel, the most glorious and powerful of the created beings, as a messenger to Nazareth, a town in Galilee. The Jews of the time had little regard for Galilee. It was considered a backwater province tainted by gentile influence. Nazareth is, even by the standards of Galilee, an obscure town. There is no mention of the town in the Old Testament. This is an obscure town in an obscure province. It's roughly like God sending the angel Gabriel to Radcliffe, Iowa, to announce the conception of His son. Mary is, by outward appearances, a completely ordinary person. She is a member of the working class, a person of no means or power, living out in the hinterlands. God has purposely chosen the obscure and humble to bring about His purposes. What distinguishes her is not her position or wealth or even intelligence or physical appearance. It is her heart for God and His sovereign choosing.

**27to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.**

Mary is "a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph." Jewish girls were betrothed early and expected to be virgins at the time of marriage. It is completely unremarkable that Mary was a virgin. It would only be remarkable if she were not. But Luke, the careful historian that he is, knows what kinds of false rumors the enemies of Christ will want to start, and thus leaves nothing to chance. He states clearly, on the record, that Mary had not had sexual intercourse.

Mary was "pledged to be married." This is something stronger than modern engagement. A betrothal lasted for around a year, could be broken only with a formal divorce. Should one of the people die during that period, the other was considered to be widowed, in spite of the fact that they apparently lived separately and did not have sexual relations.

The fact that Joseph is a descendant of David is important because this is Messiah, God's anointed One. And the Old Testament prophecy is that Messiah would be a descendant of David, a member of the Jewish royal family.

**28The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."**

It might have been possible to hear this greeting as not terribly unusual. After all, even if she was only from Nazareth, Mary was a Jew, and indeed the Jews were highly favored and blessed by the presence of God. But Mary understands the greeting for what it is, something quite out of the ordinary. She doesn't think "Of course, this is only right, I'm after all, a Jew and a pretty righteous person on top of it." She responds with characteristic humility. The word translated "favored" is, in fact, the Greek word usually translated "grace" or "gift." The emphasis of the Gospel always comes back to the kindness of God. On any sort of an absolute scale, this is God's great unmerited kindness and Mary knows that.

**<sup>29</sup>Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.**

**<sup>30</sup>But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.**

Mary was greatly "troubled." Apparently, this is a very strong and intensive word, used nowhere else in the New Testament. She is to not be afraid. Afraid of what? For one thing, this is a very powerful, awesome being that's speaking to her. Afraid, too, in the right kind of way, in respect/reverence of God. It's God who's speaking to her here through Gabriel. Afraid perhaps as well that she's now standing out from the crowd. She's not just a person the community of Faith. She's a person that's been singled out for God's attention. She is a person of genuine humility, and such people never are comfortable with being singled out. And the record is that those who are appointed to special tasks rarely find them to be without hardship. God promises the strength necessary to do what He calls us to do, but He does not promise that doing His work will be easy or always pleasant.

**<sup>31</sup>You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.**

Mary recognizes this as something more than a statement that she and Joseph will have children. It may be that at this point the words of Isaiah the prophet come rushing into her mind.

**Isaiah 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.**

She is to give him the name "Jesus," the name of Joshua of the Old Testament, the name meaning "Yahweh saves."

**<sup>32</sup>He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,**

Now these statements to Mary become unmistakably Messianic. At this point, she cannot help but understand that Gabriel is speaking to her about the long awaited Messiah. There are Old Testament passages like **Psalm 2** and **Psalm 89**.

**Psalm 2:6 "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill."**

**<sup>7</sup>I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father.**

**Psalm 89:26 He will call out to me, 'You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior.'**

**<sup>27</sup>I will also appoint him my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.**

**Luke 1:33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."**

And there are Old Testament passages like **2 Samuel 7**, **Psalm 45**, **Isaiah 9**, and **Daniel 7**.

**2Samuel 7:13 He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.**

**2Samuel 7:16 Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.'"**

**Psalms 45:6 Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.**

**Isaiah 9:6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**

**7Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.**

**Daniel 7:13 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.**

**14He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.**

Passages such as these must by now have been ringing in Mary's head. After all these years and all the praying and waiting for Messiah, He's coming, and she's to be the mother. It's too much for her to take in without gasping for air.

**34"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"**

This is not the voice of doubt, but rather the voice of overwhelming wonder. Zechariah, when told that he and Elizabeth were to have a child in their old age, answered Gabriel in a doubting way, and was rebuked for the answer. But this is something else. Mary is just having a hard time taking it all in. This is an honest inquiry about the details.

**35The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.**

If we have any sense, we look at every conception as a miracle. But this is beyond the ordinary. The child is going to have no natural father and in fact is going to be God incarnate, the Son of God. People have rightly said that this is the hinge on which all the rest of the NT miracles turn. If this be true, there is no problem understanding the miracles of Jesus. If He is God incarnate, of course He could feed the 5000 or calm the sea.

**36Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month.**

It is God who makes the barren fertile and gives children as He chooses. Mary hasn't asked for a confirmation of the promise to her, but she is nevertheless given one. Gabriel now lets her in on the news that by the grace of God, her aged relative Elizabeth is carrying John the Baptist. Is all of this possible? IS it possible that the old and infertile Elizabeth is with child? Is it possible that she Mary will, in a completely miraculous way carry in her own womb, the Son of God? Of course it is. God is God.

**37For nothing is impossible with God."**

This reminds of God's reply to Abraham when Sarah laughs at the thought of having a child in her old age.

**Genesis 18:14 Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."**

It is God who has established the "laws of nature." He is not bound by the laws He has established. The One who called into existence the entire universe is not subject to the rules that He established for that creation. Nothing is too hard for God.

Mary's reply to Gabriel is one of the simplest and yet most profound and appropriate statements by a human being recorded in Scripture.

**Luke 1:38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.**

Think about this reply. What does she know about what's to come? She knows that there's great blessing, to be sure. But she doesn't know the details. And she surely understands that with the blessings are going to come real hardships. In the immediate future is going to come the awkward situation of being pregnant before the consummation of her marriage to Joseph, and then a lifetime of off-color remarks from rough people with no appreciation of who the baby is. But her response is one of humble and beautiful submission to the will of God, and confidence in His goodness and His ability to strengthen and bring her through what He gives her to do. One can hear in the words of Mary here the words of her son years later in the garden.

**Luke 22:42 "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."**

It is no wonder that Mary was chosen by God for this task. Her heart is right. Her reply is one we ought to admire and determine to imitate. J C Ryle said, "Let us seek in our daily practical Christianity to exercise the same blessed spirit of faith that we see here in the Virgin Mary. Let us be willing to go anywhere, to do anything and be anything, whatever be the present and immediate inconvenience, so long as God's will is clear and the path of duty is plain." ... Ryle goes on to quote from Hall: "All disputations with God after His will is known arise from infidelity. There is not a more noble proof of faith than to captivate the powers of all our understanding and will to our Creator, and without all questionings to go blindfold wither He will lead us."