

THE EARTHSHAKING BIRTH OF JOHN THE FORERUNNER OF CHRIST Luke 1:57-66

(ESV) "Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.⁵⁸ And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.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.⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And they all wondered.⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.⁶⁵ And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea,⁶⁶ 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."

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, Rosemary Dawson served as a chaplain at Geisinger Medical Center in Danville, PA, about 40 miles north of Harrisburg. Rosemary got to know a fervent Christian woman named Gerry who worked in the hospital. Late one night while on duty, Gerry was called to the bedside of a woman with a severe heart attack. By the time Gerry got there, the woman had been pronounced dead. All the staff had left her room except one doctor and a nurse. Gerry turned to leave, thinking she wasn't needed. But she sensed God urging her to stay, so she entered the room and sat next to the woman's body. Not fully understanding God's purpose for her being there, she made herself available to God's Spirit by telling the doctor and nurse she wanted to pray for the woman and her family. As she began to pray, she felt the Holy Spirit praying through her with power and authority. Suddenly, the dead woman bolted straight up and cried out, "What's going on here?" At that moment Gerry didn't know who was the most frightened: herself, the woman, the doctor, or the nurse? They shared a natural fear: a reaction to a shockingly unexpected event! The "neighbors and relatives" who gathered for the momentous naming of Elizabeth's miracle baby felt a similar "fear" wave pass over them, which settled into worshipful awe as they beheld God's miracle power.

A miracle is a surprising (or startling!), yet welcome event that cannot be explained by scientific or natural laws and is therefore considered to be the work of God. In Old Testament days, was miracle-working power ever under a person's control to be invoked at will? No; miracles could only be invoked by people who were under control of God's will. The last such direct miracles were in Daniel's time at least 550 years before **Jesus'** birth. God's usual pattern is to dramatically intervene in behalf of those who put themselves at risk by taking a stand for His will (as rescuing Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace or Daniel from the lions' den, **Daniel 3, 6**). Yet, even at the height of God's miraculous displays in the days of Moses & Joshua, or Elijah & Elisha, miracles were far from a frequent event. This changed with the Son of God coming to earth, as **Matthew 8:14-17** reveals: "When Jesus went into Peter's house, He saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever.¹⁵ So He touched her hand, and the fever left her. Then she got up and began to serve Him.¹⁶ When evening came, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed. He drove out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick,¹⁷ so that what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah [**53:4**] might be fulfilled: 'He Himself took our weaknesses and carried our diseases.'"

Peter preached to a vast Jerusalem crowd on the Day of Pentecost, 50 days after **Jesus'** crucifixion. In **Acts 2:22**, he underscored how miracles powerfully confirmed **Jesus** is the Christ (Messiah): "Men of Israel, listen to these words: This Jesus the Nazarene was a man pointed out to you by God with miracles, wonders, and signs that God did among you through Him, just as you yourselves know." **Acts 2:41 & 43** records the impact of Peter's preaching, just after God's Holy Spirit "'clothed" **Jesus'** disciples "'with power from on high,'" as **Jesus** promised in **Luke 24:49**: "So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about 3,000 people were added to them.⁴³ Then fear came over everyone, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles." Throughout the early years of the Church, awe-inspiring

displays of God's miraculous power continued, as **Jesus** promised all His followers could experience in **John 14:12**: "I assure you: The one who believes in Me will also do the works that I do. And he will do even greater works than these, because I am going to the Father."

Of course, some seek to selfishly use or abuse **Jesus'** power and promises. There's a joke of a less than Christlike minister who was stopped for speeding. The state trooper smelled alcohol on his breath, saw an empty wine bottle on the floor, and asked, "Sir, have you been drinking?" The minister replied, "Just water." The trooper asked him, "Then why do I smell wine?" The minister looked down at the bottle and exclaimed, "Good Lord, He's done it again!" Today's sermon explores the significance of the Miracles of John's Birth and the significance of Miracles in Our Lives Today.

I. MIRACLES OF JOHN'S BIRTH

Vs. 57: "Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and bore a son." Luke has already reported nine months have passed since Elizabeth's conception (**1:24, 26, 36, 56**). John is ready to be born!

Vs. 58: "And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her." No one had expected this event to happen. Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up hope of ever enjoying parenthood after Elizabeth passed menopause. They never dreamed during their agonizing years of barrenness that the LORD delayed responding to their prayers to fulfill them more wonderfully! God's "mercy" towards Elizabeth in particular is twofold: 1) John's supernatural conception removed her public "disgrace" for being childless at a time motherhood was a woman's main occupation (**1:7, 36**), and 2) Elizabeth's pregnancy and delivery were without mishap for her or the child; quite unusual for a first pregnancy in a woman at least in her mid-50s!

Vs. 59: "And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child." God prescribed in **Leviticus 12:1-3** that all Jewish males were to be circumcised "on the eighth day." The physical act of circumcision became the "sign of the covenant" God made with Abraham and his descendants (**Genesis 17:9-14**). It symbolized God's claim upon the Israelites from conception as His "treasured" "possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth" (**Deuteronomy 14:2; 26:18**), and their responsibility to live as a "holy" people committed to be loyal to Him and to separate themselves from every action unclean in His eyes. **Vs. 59** continues: "And they would have called him Zechariah after his father." Luke does not explain why the "relatives and neighbors" who came to celebrate the child's circumcision insisted he be named for "his father." Some may have thought Zechariah's inability to regain his speech after nine months meant he'd suffered a serious stroke during his tense moments of offering incense outside the Holy of Holies in the Temple (**Luke 1:8-10, 21-22**). A man at least 70 years old suffering such a stroke would not be assumed to have long to live. Sons were rarely named after their fathers due to the Jewish custom of identifying sons by their fathers. **Matthew 4:21** tells us "Going on from there, He [Jesus] saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and his brother John." It would have sounded redundant to say, "James the son of James," or to call Elizabeth's son, "Zechariah the son of Zechariah."

In ancient Israel, names were descriptive. They could describe the child or suggest special service to God. "Samson," means, "like the sun," the mightiest heavenly body affecting life on earth, for Samson's awesome, God-given strength. **Luke 1:13** records the angel Gabriel declared to Zechariah, "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John." "John" in Hebrew means, "the LORD" (Yahweh) has been gracious." In Greek, "John" can mean, "God is a gracious giver." What a fitting name for the one God chose to proclaim the Day of Salvation through the gracious gift of His Son has arrived!

Vs. 60-62: "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." For challenging God's ability to give him a son supernaturally after Elizabeth had lost all

natural ability to conceive (**Luke 1:18-20**), Zechariah has been banished to the sidelines until he signaled his willingness to fully embrace God's will. Though unable to speak, Zechariah could have used a "writing tablet" (a wood tablet coated with wax) to inform Elizabeth of Gabriel's words to him of **Luke 1:13-20**, including God's wish for their child to be named "John." Zechariah must have communicated many times over the past nine months by writing out his thoughts.

Vs. 63: "And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And they all wondered." Two things should catch our attention. First, Zechariah used the present tense, "His name *is* John; not "*shall be* John." Secondly, in the Greek text of the New Testament, word order is much more crucial to the meaning of a sentence than in English. "John is his name" is what Zechariah wrote. This is his emphatic way to declare their child's name has already been determined by God and he's not about to change it!

Vs. 64: "And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God." The Greek word here for "immediately" often accompanies miracles in **Luke & Acts**. "Immediately" signals God is ready to deliver on His promises to us whenever we and our circumstances fully align with His will. Zechariah has now had nine months to repent of his unbelief, with fresh conviction shaming him each time he gazed upon their son swelling his wife's body. His act of faith of embracing God's chosen name and chosen plan for "John" brought about God's gracious response, "immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed." We understand the necessity of **Jesus'** miraculous, Virgin Birth to escape the corruption of sin upon the human race. But the Bible does not explain why John is supernaturally born. Most giants of faith—as Abraham, Moses, Daniel, Peter, and Paul—were born without God's miraculous intervention. Perhaps God delayed John's birth until all earthly hope for it was gone to purify the motives of his parents. Their selfish insistence John should fulfill their plans for him, rather than releasing their claims upon John to the LORD, could have disrupted John's Divine mission to serve Christ as His forerunner.

Vs. 65-66: "And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, ⁶⁶and 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.'" "Fear" means "fear-filled awe"; a "humble reverence" in us the manifestation God's earthshaking power should inspire. "Laid them up in their hearts" ("turned the whole matter over in their hearts"—Phillips) suggests all who heard about the events concerning John's birth were deeply moved. John's conception and delivery are clearly miraculous events. Luke implies, "Stay tuned. There's more news to come of just how special this child and the One to follow him are!"

II. MIRACLES IN OUR LIVES TODAY

Until the events associated with John's birth late in their lives, God-honoring Zechariah and Elizabeth had probably never experienced a true miracle. Despite John being "'great in the sight of the Lord" and "filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb" (**Luke 1:15**), he never experienced God's miraculous power working through him, according to **John 10:40-42**: "So He [Jesus] departed again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing earlier, and He remained there. ⁴¹ Many came to Him and said, 'John never did a sign, but everything John said about this man was true.' ⁴² And many believed in Him there." "Sign" translates a Greek word meaning, "a miracle or wonder by which God authenticates the Divine authority of someone ministering in His name." The power of John's preaching made such Divine endorsement unnecessary. Direct miracles may not be necessary in our lives, either. We needn't seek to manufacture them. A certain Dr. Bloom was known for his seemingly "miraculous" cures for arthritis. He had a waiting room full of people when a little old lady, completely bent over, shuffled in slowly leaning on her short, stout cane. Her turn came to go into the Dr.'s office. Amazingly, she emerged within half an hour walking completely erect with her head held high. A woman in the waiting room who'd seen all this happen came up to her and said, "It's a miracle! You walked in bent in half and now you're walking upright. What did the Dr. do?" She answered, "Miracle, shmiracle. He gave me a longer cane."

Yet, though direct miracles may not be necessary in our lives, we may deny ourselves opportunities God gives us of experiencing His miraculous power if we insist on staying in our comfort zone; if we refuse to put ourselves at risk in His service. When was the last time we turned down a ministry opportunity in our Savior's behalf by insisting, "I could never do that"? We may be right. Maybe we cannot do it ourselves. What **Jesus** is asking is that we allow Him to serve others through us; not that we try to do it ourselves. A. W. Tozer (1897-1963) observed, "God is looking for people through whom He can do the impossible. What a pity that we plan only the things we can do by ourselves." When I responded to God's call at age 18 to become a minister, though so introverted this thought terrified me, there was no money to enroll at the private, Christian college where He was leading me. God miraculously intervened in our family's finances to provide the funding. When health issues twice threatened to prevent or severely limit my service to the Lord, He Divinely healed me. In the first years after God graciously claimed me as His, He proved to me that when we put ourselves on the line in some way to be obedient to His will, there is literally nothing He will not do in our behalf to make it possible to serve Him!

CONCLUSION

We may not be called upon to place ourselves on the line for **Jesus** in ways similar to what we read in the Bible or in the testimonies of others. But a more common test of our willingness to place ourselves at risk in obedience to the Lord concerns our finances, as this story demonstrates. H. Z. Duke, a Baptist layman, founded the Duke & Ayres Nickel Stores, a chain of variety stores based in Dallas that operated from about 1910 to 1990. Around 1940, Duke came to Palo Pinto County, TX, about halfway between Abilene & Fort Worth. He spoke on a number of occasions urging God's people to take Him at His word that God would bless their material needs if they give Him first place in everything. This included supporting God's work with their tithes and offerings. One day, he asked a pastor and county missionary, known as Brother Kuykendal, if he believed in tithing, to which he replied that he did. Mr. Duke then asked if he practiced tithing. He answered, "No, I do not. I believe in tithing, but I cannot practice it. You see, I have 13 children at home. Every meal 15 of us sit down at the table. I receive only \$125 a month, \$1500 a year, as salary. I have to maintain my own horse and buggy for constant traveling. It is just impossible to take care of all the needs of a family of fifteen out of \$125 a month and have money left to tithe. So I believe in tithing, and I preach it, but I cannot practice it."

Mr. Duke then said, "I want you to set out to give God at least \$12.50 every month as soon as you get your salary. Then as you feel led, you may give more. I promise you that if you need help, I will give it. Simply write me a letter and say, 'Brother Duke. I am giving a tithe, but I miss the money. I need it for my family. I have given this year so much.' I promise you that I will send you a check by return mail. Are you willing to try tithing on that basis?" Brother Kuykendal, excited by this offer, began tithing. That year, God took care of his needs in unusual and surprising ways. For one thing, his family of 15 had no Dr. bills throughout the entire year! He never had to send that letter to Mr. Duke. Near the end of the year, he came to realize, "I had taken the word of a man when I did not take the promise of God! Now I had proven God's promises and found that He took care of me and my big family on a small salary. I found that \$112.50 per month took care of our family better, with God's blessing, than \$125 did without being under the blessed covenant which He has made with those who seek first the kingdom of God and who tithe."

What is God's promise? **Malachi 3:10-12** (GNT): "Bring the full amount of your tithes to the Temple [house of worship], so that there will be plenty of food there. Put Me to the test and you will see that I will open the windows of heaven and pour out on you in abundance all kinds of good things. ¹¹ I will not let insects destroy your crops, and your grapevines will be loaded with grapes. ¹² Then the people of all nations will call you happy, because your land will be a good place to live."