

# An Impossible Redemption

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## Introduction

### The Text

Luke 1:5–17, 24-25

<sup>5</sup> 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.

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

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

<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.

<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.

<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.

<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.

<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.”

...

<sup>24</sup> ¶ After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying,

<sup>25</sup> “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”

### Preaching in the Balance

A. One of the most difficult calls on the preacher is to somehow walk the balance between showing the depth and riches and interconnectedness of the whole canon of God’s Word, while not losing the simple movement and logic of the text at hand.

1. In the text we just read there are countless backstories evoked, all of which add layers of meaning and richness to the story immediately before us, and God wants us to see them. To dismiss them would be to thin out this story’s depth, to lower the volume of its message, to dim the light of its glory.

2. But at the same time, we cannot deny that these verses, as Luke is penning them, just roll on, quite quickly. In this we are reminded that we mustn't so chase after the backstories that we lose our way in the story before us.
3. Somehow, God be gracious to me, we must aim for both: depth and breadth, macro and micro, metanarrative and sub-narrative, the whole canon of Scripture and Luke 1:5-25. I shall try my best then to proceed through these verses, and especially these first couple of chapters, with an eye to both.

## First 2 Chapters

A. With this in mind then, before we focus in on the first 3 vv. of our text (5-7), let me locate us within the first 2 chapters, often referred to as the Infancy Narrative.

1. The first 2 chapters of Luke contain in seed form all the major themes that will be developed in the rest of the gospel and Acts. Beyond this, if one reads carefully, he can see that these chapters are highly structured, and the structure itself is meant to aid our understanding of Luke's essential message.
  - a. Luke is clearly paralleling the stories of John the Baptist (the last prophet of the Old Covenant age [Luk 16:16]) and Jesus the Christ (the Messiah who is bringing in the New Covenant age).
    - i. He does this it seems to me, with a twofold purpose in mind: He wants to show that the coming of the Christ is both in continuation with the plan of old and in radical contrast to it, as the unprecedented climax of that plan. As I've said previously: All things new is emerging from all things old!
2. Making quick note of the structure, then, we find:
  - a. The Announcement of John's Birth (1:5-25)
  - b. The Announcement of Jesus' Birth (1:26-38)
  - c. The Meeting of John & Jesus in the Womb (1:39-56)
  - d. The Birth of John (1:57-80)
  - e. The Birth of Jesus (2:1-40)
  - f. The Boy Jesus in the temple (2:41-52)
3. There are significant similarities all along the way and yet at every point, it is the contrast between the two that make the essential message clear: Jesus is supreme—the One to whom John, and all the Old Covenant age with him, is pointing!
  - a. We see this in their callings: John is forerunner, but Jesus is fulfillment.
  - b. We see this in their titles: John is "the prophet of the Most High" (1:76), but Jesus is "the Son of the Most High" (1:32).
  - c. We see this in ministries: John is to "make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (1:17), but Jesus is the "Lord" (2:11).

- d. We see this in the structure of the story: There is a back and forth in the story through chapter 1, but by chapter 2 it is all Jesus—stories being told from then on are without parallel for John.
4. It all may start with John, but its climax is with Jesus!
- a. It might be worth asking here at the beginning to get our hearts warmed up: Where is Jesus in your story? Is He the forerunner for you? Do you invite Him in to help you be the star of the show? Or are you the forerunner for His glory? Is all of your life like John the Baptist: “He must increase, but I must decrease!” (Joh 3:30)?!

## First 3 Verses

- A. Having located ourselves within the larger flow of this section, we are now ready to focus in on our text for the morning: vv. 5-8:

<sup>5</sup> 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.

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

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

- B. We spent all of last time in v. 5 and told the story on more of a national level—from the perspective of Israel as a whole. We noted the tension in the first half of the verse: What was Israel feeling after 400 silent years, still under foreign rule, with all the promises but nothing to show for it? God has forgotten. But we moved to the glorious relief of that tension in the latter half of the verse, as we considered the meaning of Zechariah’s name—“YHWH Remembers”—and the likely meaning of Elizabeth’s name—“My God has sworn!” He has not forgotten Israel but is now remembering His plan and His promises made to them.
- 1. Now we zoom the camera in on this couple. And we come to find that they embody in themselves the struggles and frustrations of their nation. The national is personal. For they too are full of promise and yet have heard from God for years nothing but silence. They love the Lord, they love each other, but they have no children. But, as with the nation, so also with this couple: YHWH remembers! And as He moves in this their personal story, He is moving for their nation and, even, for the nations!
    - a. We shall proceed through 3 headings this morning: (1) A Righteous Couple (vv. 5-6); (2) A Barren Womb (v. 7); and (3) A Miraculous Birth (vv. 8ff.).

## (1) A Righteous Couple (vv. 5-6)

- A. The first thing that is brought to our attention in the story is the quality of this couple, both in lineage and in ethic, both in pedigree and in morality.

1. Of their COMMENDABLE PEDIGREE we read this in v. 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.”
  - a. I must limit my discussion here (as we’ll probably elaborate on this more next time) but the essential note is that we have in Zechariah both a son of Aaron and a daughter of Aaron. Aaron you recall was the brother of Moses and the one anointed by God to be the first high priest of Israel (Exo 28:1-3). The point of including this data then is to show that this couple had a most commendable pedigree within Israel. It doesn’t get much better than this.
  
2. But there is more to be said of them than just their pedigree. Luke also goes out of his way to note their COMMENDABLE MORALITY as we read on in v. 6: “And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.”
  - a. Righteous, blameless? What are we to make of this?
    - i. This cannot be our focus here but we must at least make note that this righteousness and blamelessness is not to be understood in an absolute sense, as if this couple does not need the gracious salvation that God was about to work in the Messiah. No! As we will later hear from the angelic host, the Christ is bringing “good news of great joy that will be for all the people” (Luk 2:10)—including Zechariah and Elizabeth. We are not to set this description of them against Paul’s discussion in Rom 3: “None is righteous, no, not one” (v. 10). There it is in its absolute sense, all are sinners before a holy God.
    - ii. But here it is spoken of relatively, particularly in relation to “the commandments and statutes of the Lord.” This points us to the Old Covenant, and it is important to remember that the Old Covenant not only included commands for man to obey, but sacrifices to cover man when he does not obey. The utter necessity and centrality of sacrifice is built into the fabric of the old covenant.
      - (1) And so to be righteous and blameless in this way does not mean to be without sin. It means rather that one is trusting God’s sacrifice for sin while desiring and attempting to live without sin. It is the Old Covenant edition of walking by faith (cf. Heb 11).

## (2) A Barren Womb (v. 7)

- A. But, as we keep reading, we find that Luke not only directs us to the commendable quality of this couple, in v. 7 he also directs us to their profound tragedy: “But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.”

B. Now why do I refer to this as a profound tragedy?

1. To be sure, such barrenness is deeply painful on its own terms—some in this church, sadly, know what I’m talking about: “We want to have children but we can’t. Why God?!”
2. But there is another layer to this for the Israelite that we might not understand at first. We must set childbearing within the context of Israel’s Scriptures.
  - a. We are given God’s plan for humanity—Where one of his original mandates is: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28) referring to bearing children.
  - b. We are given God’s promises to Israel—After the fall and curse, childbearing becomes a troublesome and painful endeavor. But God calls out Abraham, who would become the father of Israel, and He makes a promise: “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations...I will make you exceedingly fruitful...(Gen 17:4, 6a). Being fruitful and multiplying is a critical part of His covenant with and promise to the people of Israel.
  - c. We find that children are a reward for obedience—“If you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God...Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb...” (Deu 28:1a, 4a).
  - d. We find that childlessness is be a punishment for disobedience—“But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then...Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb...(Deu 28:15a, 18a).
3. All of this would compound to make childlessness an almost unbearable reproach for an Israelite—you don’t fit into God’s plan for humanity, or His promise for your nation, and you bear in your body indications not of reward and blessing, but of punishment and curse!
  - a. It is for this reason that in the Scriptures we see barren women made to be the objects of scorn and ridicule. These women struggle with jealousy, anger, bitterness, and depression even to the point of suicidality: “Give me children, or I shall die!” (Gen 30:1). It was better to die than to live childless in Israel.
4. But here’s what makes the situation profoundly tragic: We’re told in v. 6 that “both” were righteous and blameless, and then we’re told in v. 7 that “both” were advanced in years and childless. What’s that?! They have been obedient and yet have received in themselves not the rewards and blessing but the punishment and curse.

- a. What were they feeling? How many tears shed? How many trembling prayers uttered in the dark hours of the night? How much reproach had she had to deal with? How much shame? And what about the confusion, running in all directions. “I love God. I’m trying to follow Him. Does He not love me? Or maybe I don’t love God like I think. Maybe there is hidden sin somewhere in my life? Maybe the other ladies are right. Maybe I’m the problem. What is wrong with me?!”
    - i. Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever struggled with the fact that obedience doesn’t always immediately lead to what we would consider blessing? Have you ever watched things go well for others and struggled with it. “Is God for me too? Is there something off with me?”
- C. Now we see why Luke notes the righteousness and blamelessness of v. 6 before giving us the tragedy in v. 7. He doesn’t want us making the mistake that Job’s friends and so many others have made through the years: “You’re suffering, you must’ve sinned.” Our theology of suffering must be more nuanced than this. To be sure, sometimes men suffer directly as a result of their sin, but often they suffer for other reasons entirely.
- 1. Consider our couple! They had no idea that even in this profound tragedy they were right in the middle of God’s ancient plan. They had no idea that God hadn’t forgotten them but was waiting for the right time to remember and remove their reproach and cover their shame! They had no idea that the years of barrenness was not for their specific sins, but for God’s glory and for their joy!
    - a. It’s as Jesus told His disciples when they questioned Him about a man blind from birth: “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (Joh 9:3).

### (3) A Miraculous Birth

- A. And so we continue following the story of our couple. After years of tears and prayers, reproach and shame, YHWH remembers: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son...” (v. 13). You thought it was over, it’s just beginning!
- 1. I think it’s safe to say that John was not praying for a son here. The note of hopelessness sounded in v. 7 and seen in his doubting of this announcement in v. 18 point us towards the conclusion that he was done praying for such a thing. He had given up on that. The priest at this point in the Holy Place would be interceding for Israel, praying for the nation.
    - a. But the amazing thing is that again we see YHWH brings together both the national and the personal. He brings together both the corporate and personal concern for redemption. He answers both prayers in one action!

- i. We are reminded, then, that when YHWH remembers, when He moves on His promises in accordance with His plan, it is not just for nations at large, it is for individuals. His salvation is not only corporate, national, even international, it is also and especially personal. It is not only the gospel by which all men are saved, it is “my gospel” (as Paul would call it in many places), by which I am saved.

(1) We hear this in those wonderful words of Elizabeth in v. 25: “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”

## The Backstories

- A. Throughout this narrative, significant backstories from the Old Testament have been evoked. I’ve been avoiding them until now because I wanted first to let the story speak to us on its own terms. Now, let’s deepen and enrich things a bit. The fact is, the Lord has been preparing us for this sort of activity. Nearly identical miraculous events occur at certain high water marks in the history of redemption. God removing barrenness as an act of sovereign grace and a way of moving His redemptive plan forward. Where else have we seen this?
  1. The prototypical example is Abraham and Sarah, the first official members of God’s covenant family. When Adam failed to fulfill the commission to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with His image, God later commissions another. But, ironically, paradoxically, the one He chooses, Abraham, has a barren wife and they both are “advanced in years” (Gen 18:11).
    - a. Their son would be named Isaac not because they saw that it was trending on babyNames.com but because it means in the Hebrew “He laughs.” This name signifies both Abraham and Sarah’s laughter of unbelief when they heard the promise because it sounded so impossible (17:17; 18:12-15), and their laughter of joy when the child of promise is in fact born to them by God’s grace (21:6)!
  2. And this story is replicated in the lives of the other key patriarchs. Remember: “I am the God of Abraham...Isaac...and...Jacob.” Well, Abraham’s wife, Sarah? Barren! But God gives him the promise that he would be fruitful and multiply, and God works the miracle. Isaac’s wife, Rebekah? Barren! But God gives him that same promise, and works the same miracle (Gen 25:21). Jacob’s wife, Rachel? Barren! But God gives him that same promise, and works the same miracle: “<sup>22</sup> Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. <sup>23</sup> She conceived and bore a son and said, ‘God has taken away my reproach.’” (Gen 30:22-23). Sound familiar? These are the words Elizabeth repeats a couple thousand years later!

- a. We are meant to see the connections. God’s activity with Zechariah and Elizabeth is a part of that work He began at first with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- 3. But there is one more barren womb that must be mentioned. The depiction of Hannah’s barrenness is perhaps most vivid and painful of all. She’s hounded and harassed. We’re told she “wept and would not eat” (1Sa 1:7b). And she’s at the temple in Shiloh, “pouring out [her] soul before the Lord” (v. 15b), and we’re told in v. 19b: “the Lord remembered her.” And she conceives, who? Samuel. The prophet of God who came before and anointed the lowly shepherd boy as king: namely, David.
  - a. We will see this all over these first few chapters. John the Baptist is the last-days Samuel who is going before the Messianic King, the Lord’s anointed, the Son of David, and it will be John’s high privilege to anoint this King at His baptism and point all the world to Him.
- B. This new work that God is going to do in Jesus, has its roots in the ancient plan. We are being connected here at the start to 2 of the most important figures in all the Old Testament: Abraham and David, which is why references to them saturate these first 2 chapters of Luke.
- C. But what’s the point here? Why all the barren wombs and miraculous births? Why close the wombs only to open? Why wait until advanced in years? If YHWH remembers is the big issue, why not remember sooner? It’s not like He forgot. What’s He trying to communicate?
  - 1. While there is much in God’s plan and timing that is a mystery to us, this much is plain: He alone can save. He lets men sit under years of silence, barrenness, not so that they would languish away in misery, but so that they might learn to look away from themselves and to Him and live! What was lost in Adam because of sin cannot be regained by man in his own strength. That’s why God makes the promise of fruitfulness and multiplication to barren couples—couples for whom such a thing would be impossible on their own! That’s the point!
    - a. This is made clear when Gabriel informs Mary of Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy: “<sup>36</sup> And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luk 1:36-37, quoting Gen 18:14).

## The Christ

- A. And the crescendo of this impossible work, the fulfillment of all the promises made to Abraham and David, is coming in Jesus Christ, God with us. All these OT stories we’re connected to here are to serve as runway lights leading us onward and upward into the big sky of Christ’s glory. God has come in Jesus to finally remove the reproach of our barrenness of soul as we lay helpless under the curse because of our sin.



1. While the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth pictures the effects of the coming Messiah's work as He removes the reproach and shame of His people and brings them into His joy, the story of Joseph and Mary pictures for us the way He is going to do this. For, while Elizabeth's pregnancy removed reproach, Mary's brought reproach. It looks like a child out of wedlock. Even Joseph resolves to divorce her quietly before the angel shows up and stops him. It's a shameful pregnancy. And it pictures the fact that in order for the Christ to remove our reproach He must become our reproach!

- a. Though He is truly the Creator and Sustainer of all things, the Vine, the very definition of fruitfulness, He would carry our sin and take on the curse of our barrenness at His crucifixion. "We esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God" (Isa 53:4b). We thought He was getting what He deserved, when truly He was getting what we deserved. All alone. No family. No children. No friends. The screaming, the agony, the blood, it looked like a miscarriage to everyone's eyes, but God's!

"It was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring...(v. 10).

- i. By this guilt offering, our sins are paid for. And by virtue of His resurrection from the dead, this dead heart, this dead womb of a man, made alive, and brought into His family, His offspring.

B. There's a reason why Isa 54 follows Isa 53:

Isa 54:1-8

<sup>1</sup> Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married," says the Lord.

<sup>2</sup> "Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes.

<sup>3</sup> For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your offspring will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities.

<sup>4</sup> ¶ "Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.

<sup>5</sup> For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.

<sup>6</sup> For the Lord has called you like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God.

<sup>7</sup> For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you.

<sup>8</sup> In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you," says the Lord, your Redeemer.