

T R I N I T Y  
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D A L L A S

The Sermon

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Luke 1:5-17

"A Startling Birth Announcement"

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TRANSCRIPT

So, I want you to take your Bible and turn with me to the gospel of Luke, Luke chapter 1. We're in verses 5-17 today. The title of this message is "A Startling Birth Announcement. A Startling Birth Announcement." Luke chapter 1, and I want to begin reading in verse 5.

"In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.

"Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering. And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and

he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

This is the reading of God's words and it'll be the focus of our study this morning. Let us go now to the Lord in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank You for Your written word, that we have it. We can study it. We can read it. We can probe deeply into it and analyze it and discover its relevance for our lives today. And so I pray that the ministry of the Holy Spirit will be very powerful in our midst, that He will take of this passage and bring it home to every heart here today, and that we will respond to the truth of Your word this day.

So, Father, now bless this congregation. Bless these brothers and sisters in Christ immeasurably this day. And lay Your hand upon me for good. Fill me with Your Spirit. Use me now, in Christ's name. Amen. [End]

In these verses we begin the story of Jesus. But the story of Jesus does not begin with Jesus. The story of Jesus actually begins with John, John the Baptist. John will be the forerunner of the Lord Christ. He will precede Jesus in his birth, in his public ministry. Even in this birth announcement, John goes first because John is the predecessor. He is the forerunner who will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

So it only makes sense as we read these verses that we would read about the announcement of John's birth first before the announcement of Jesus' birth, because John will be out there on the frontlines. John will be the tip of the spear. John will be leading this time in redemptive history and preparing the way for the coming of the King, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The chief mission of John, we could put it this way, is very simply to point men and women to Christ. And we can relate to this, because this is why the Lord has left us here on the earth. If you think about it, the moment that we are saved, He could have taken us to heaven the moment we're converted. And the worship is glorious there. Fellowship is perfect there.

Why are we here? Why do we still remain on the earth? And, ultimately, it is the same purpose as was given to John. We're here to be witnesses for Christ. We're here to point men and women away from ourselves and to point them to Christ. And so in this sense, John is the example for us. John is a way-shower for us. And so there's much for us to learn from John the Baptist, and I want us to walk through this passage because this is one extraordinary individual.

So, I want to begin in verse 5, and the first heading I want to set before is "the historical setting." You remember I told you last week that Dr. Luke who writes this gospel, he was a very diligent researcher of historical facts and places and times. And so he begins this account by giving us a historical marker.

He says, "In the days of Herod, king of Judea." Now, this is Herod the Great. Herod ruled from BC 37 to BC 4. Jesus was born in either 5 or 6 BC. So this is probably 6 or 7 BC at the time of this writing. And Herod, who is Herod the Great, was known as king of the Jews because he presided over, this says, "He was king of Judea." That means he's king of Israel. He's the king of the Jews. He is presiding over the whole land of Israel.

It's this very same Herod who was so troubled when the magi arrive. After the birth of Christ, they have followed the shekinah glory of God to the very place where Christ is born and is in Bethlehem. And as they come to Jerusalem, Herod asks, "Who are you looking for?" and they say, "The one who is born King of the Jews."

Well, Herod's thinking, "I believe I'm king of the Jews. What do you mean you're looking king of the Jews?" And so to make certain that there's no competition for his throne, as you recall, he has every baby boy two year and younger murdered so there's no chance for there to be another king of the Jews.

So, he is ruthless. He is, in many ways, a madman. He will stop at nothing. He will do anything to retain his power. And so it's at this time we read in verse 5, "there was a priest named Zacharias," - "Zacharias" means Jehovah has remembered - "and he was of the division of Abijah." And let me just give you a little bit of background.

A thousand years earlier when David was king, he divided the priests into 24 divisions, and each division would serve twice a year for one week in the temple - that's 48 weeks - and the other 4 weeks they would all serve for the religious national holidays. And so, during the Babylonian captivity, the priests were all taken to Babylon; only 4 divisions come back. And so they divide the 4 divisions of priests into, again, 24 divisions. And Zacharias is a member of the 8th division. So twice a year for one week, his division will go in and serve in the temple. So that's at this point what we need to know. More about that in a moment.

"And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth." This was a wonderful marriage between them, a wonderful couple. They both loved God, they both fear God, they both follow God, they have both devoted their lives to God, and we know that because of verse 6: "They were both righteous in the sight of God." That's a strong a statement as can be made about anyone.

There's two ways that they had righteousness. There is imputed righteousness, that's in the act of justification by faith; and there is imparted righteousness, and that is God at work in the one who is justified in sanctification, that they would grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

And so we see here, really, how someone was saved before the death of Christ. We would say the Old Testament. But even here in the early dawning of the gospel account, and someone was saved in the Old Testament exactly like someone is saved in the New Testament. There's only one way of salvation. You've heard me say this before, that anyone who's ever been saved has been saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Whether it was before the death of Christ looking ahead to His coming, or whether it's on this side of the cross looking back at the cross, everyone who was saved, we all meet at the cross, and that is the only way of salvation.

I'd remind you, "Abraham" - it says in Genesis 15:6 - "believed God; and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." And so, Elizabeth and Zacharias are just like Abraham. They're just like David. They're just like Moses. They're just like others. They have believed in the gospel that has been presented to them, and God has declared them to be righteous.

But what I see here is really more than just justification by faith. Here it's referring to sanctification, surely in the least, because of what follows. He says that "they were walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord." That's what we call progressive sanctification, the outworking of which is practical righteousness.

The word "righteousness" means conformity to a standard. And the standard is given to us right here in the words "commandments" and "requirements" of the Lord. So what this tells us about this couple is that they had a daily lifestyle that was blameless. Now, that does not mean sinless, because no one is sinless except the Lord Jesus Christ. Literally, the word "blameless" means free from fault. And this is just like a qualification for an elder. He must be blameless, which means that there should be no glaring area in their life that stands out that is not consistent with the teaching of Scripture, that they model the message, if you will.

And this is exactly what is true of Zacharias and Elizabeth: "They walked blamelessly" - note - "in all the commandments." The word "all" really

stands out to me. This is a comprehensive commitment to keep the word of God. They were not being selective in picking and choosing which parts of the commandments that they want to obey. This says, "all the commandments."

And the word "commandments" really means divine charges, divine injunctions that bind the conscience. And they understood this, and they followed in obedience. And the word "requirements," that you see, refers to specific concrete situations. So, the commandments would be like the Ten Commandments that are broad-brushstroke commandments, and the requirements are more specific teachings under the law in how a person is to work this out in their life, whether it's at home, whether it's at work, whether it's in a religious setting. And this couple, they're walking the talk. They are living up to what they profess to believe. And so, they are true believers, they are justified by faith, and they are living a life of obedience to the word of God. They are exemplary.

Now, why this is important is Luke as he records this, he wants us to know that they are living faithfully right where God has placed them. They have no idea what's about to happen. They have no idea that an angel is going to show up with a message from heaven and that they will have one of the most special important assignments entrusted to them that has ever been given to anyone. They will be the father and the mother of John the Baptist who will be the forerunner of the Lord Jesus Christ. They have no idea what is right around the corner, what will be next for them in their walk with the Lord. All they know is they are doing what is expected of them right where they are. They are blooming where they are planted.

This should speak volumes to us today, because God has placed each and every one of us, He's placed you, He's placed me, in a specific place of serving the Lord. And none of us really know what awaits us tomorrow. None of us know, really, what's around the corner and what's in the mind of God, what God has planned for our Christian lives, even for this church. And so it is incumbent upon us to be faithful right now with the teaching of Scripture and to comply with it, and to move forward by faith in our Christian lives. And who is to say what God has planned for you right

around the corner? God is always looking for people who are faithful right now.

So, what has God assigned you to do right now? It may be to be a mother or a father. It may be for you to teach a Sunday School class or a Bible Study. It may be for you to serve in a particular capacity in this church. It may be for you to be a witness for Christ to your family and in your neighborhood. Who knows what it is for you? But you need to be faithful to do right now what God has assigned you to do right now.

I mean, sometimes people think, "You know, if I had a million dollars, I'd give half of it to the Lord." Well, you have ten dollars right now. Do you give half of that to the Lord? And so, we need to be faithful right now where we are and trust God to open up doors that are before us. First Corinthians 4:2 says, "It is required of stewards that one be found faithful." Remember, Jesus told the parable, and at the end He says to one of His servants, "Well done, good and faithful servant." God has not called you to be successful, He's called you to be faithful. You leave the results to Him. All success comes from the Lord. You provide the faithfulness, God provides the success.

Well, let's continue to look at this. And the second thing I want you to note is "the personal trial," that's in verse 7; because none of us go through life without challenges, right? I have some to share with you if you're lacking any challenges or trials. None of us go through life with a free pass. And so even Zacharias and Elizabeth have a challenge, have a trial, have an emptiness.

And so, we read here, verse 7, "But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren." In this day and time, barrenness was seen as a sign of divine disfavor, that if a woman could not bear children, somehow it was perceived that this must be some discipline from the Lord. I mean, it's the total opposite of the mindset today, that if you have children, that's almost a burden. Well, back then it was a blessing.

Anne and I started with twin boys, and I remember we'd go to the grocery store, and they're in the little grocery carts, and the checkout lady would inevitably say, "Oh, double burden, double trouble." And I would go, "No, ma'am, double blessing, triple blessing, quadruple blessing."

Well, Elizabeth is barren; and, no doubt, there's a sadness. There's an emptiness within her soul because she does not have a child yet and not fulfilled her motherly duty and responsibility. But I do want you to note, it's not because there's anything wrong in Elizabeth's life. We just read that she is walking blamelessly before the Lord, and she's keeping the commandments and all of the requirements of Scripture.

This is all in God's hands. And God has chosen to this point not to give them children, because God has a masterplan that is far greater than they can even imagine. It would have never dawned on them that they would be the parents of the forerunner of the Messiah. And God is not ready yet to send the Messiah, or at least up until now; and He is now. And so this is the trial in which they found themselves, and it's really all a matter of trusting God, and it's all a matter of God's perfect timing. No doubt, they have prayed about this. No doubt, they have prayed and prayed and prayed, "God, give us a child." And it seems as though God is not answering.

Well, I want you to know that God hears every prayer and God answers every prayer. You may say, "Well, I've been praying for some things and God hasn't answered it yet." Oh, yes, He has. Every prayer that we bring to the Lord, He answers it, either yes, no, or wait. But they're all answered perfectly. And that's what you want is God's perfect answer, because He knows what is best.

And so, this is where this couple is. They are put in a position as they are following the Lord and living a godly life. They are in the position of having to wait on the Lord, not knowing what the Lord will do.



I don't know what's going on in your life today and what you're having to wait on God for, whether it's a job or a child or a relationship or a marriage or health or whatever that is. You just keep praying. And God's timing is always perfect, and God knows far better than what you and I know. In fact, you and I would choose whatever God chooses if we only knew as much as God knows.

Well, the third thing I want you to note, as we come to verse 8, is "the providential choice," that in the midst of this trial, God intervenes, God steps in. And we read in verse 8, "Now it happened" – let me just stop right there.

Nothing just happens, okay. As Luke writes this, there's a certain tongue-in-cheek, and it happened. No, this is all pre-scripted by God from before the foundation of the world. God's not making this up as He goes, everything's going according to plan. But from human perspective, it happened. Well, from the divine perspective, it was prepared and planned.

"Now it happened that while he" – Zacharias – "was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, according to the custom" – into verse 9 – "of the priestly office," let's stop right there. What this means is this is one of those two weeks when his 8th division is set apart to go into the temple and to serve there.

There were many different priestly functions that they would perform as it involved the worship of the people and prayers, et cetera, but this is one of those two weeks. But when it was one of your weeks, something else would occur. They would cast lots for one of you in this division to go into the Holy Place and to present incense. Now, this was a once in a lifetime opportunity, once in a lifetime experience. This could only happen once in your life; and for a priest, this was the greatest thing that could occur in your life.

Now, the high priest - there's only one high priest - one day a year he may go into the Holy of Holies, and that was so sacred and so holy, as you recall, they would tie a rope around him, and they would hang a bell on him as he goes into the Holy of Holies, because if he's not right with God and he goes in and does his own thing in there, God will strike him dead. And if they no longer hear the bell ringing, that means he's not moving, and they would just pull him out of there with a rope. He was dying to get out of there.

Just want to make sure you're still with me, okay. Boo, I scared you on that one. So, it was a bell ringer, let me tell ya. So, yeah.

So, they cast lots, which is like rolling dice, to see who among the 8th division is - it's going to turn up his name, and he will be selected to now go into the Holy Place. He can't go into the Holy of Holies, but he can go into the Holy Place. And they so believed in the sovereignty of God that they believe that God was in control of even the turning up of the lot. And you know why they believed that? Because the Bible teaches that.

And in Proverbs 16:33 it says, "There is the casting of the lot into the lap, but its every turning up is from the LORD." Did you hear that? There's no such thing as luck. There's no such thing as chance. There's no such thing as happenstance. God is micromanaging the universe. There are no maverick molecules in the universe. And so, in the Old Testament, there were times when they sought to know the will of God. And you know what they did? They cast lots, and they believed the invisible hand of God would turn it up the way that it was supposed to go.

And so, that's what taking place here in verse 9. It says, "He was chosen by lot." That means his number came up, his name came up that day. And this really was the invisible finger of God pointing at Zacharias of, of all the times in his entire lifetime of serving as a priest, today is the day. God has this day a red letter day in his life. It says, "to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense," that this is God setting the table exactly the way

circumstances and events are to unfold. This is the way God governs the universe.

And let me just say this. Every one of you are here today by divine appointment, there's not a one of you that just stumbled in randomly. You're all here. And this is the passage of all passages. This is the one God wants you to hear today, and God has marked out this passage for you today. What is it that God wants you to learn from this passage? And so just as with Zacharias, it was the day of all days for him. There's a very real sense that today is the most important day of your Christian life. Nothing will ever supersede to this point today in your life.

And we read in verse 10, "And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the giving of the incense." So, this is the providential appointment by God. This is how God works. This is how God runs the universe. This is how God is working in your life. You may not recognize it, you may not see it; that's why it requires faith in the Scripture.

We come to verse 11, and number four, I want you to see "the celestial visit," because what now happens next completely, completely catches Zacharias off-guard.

In verse 11, "And an angel of the Lord appeared to him." This has never happened in Zacharias' little life. "The word "angel" simply means messenger. He is a messenger who has been dispatched from the courts of heaven, from the throne of grace, from God the Father, and has been dispatched down to this world, and he has winged his flight down to this planet; and of all of the continents and of all of the nations, he is directed by God to the land of Israel, and not just to anywhere in Israel, but exactly here in the Holy Place. And as Zacharias comes in, here is the angel of the Lord with a message from God.

An angel is a ministering spirit who can take on a physical appearance. And as he appears, he appears physically, he appears visibly, and it says,

"standing to the right of the altar of incense." And as he's standing there, he is standing in pristine holiness, dazzling in splendor with the light, the glory of God, no doubt, still reflecting from him, as he is come from the immediate presence of God.

Verse 12, this blows Zacharias' mind. He is astonished. He's amazed. He doesn't have a category for this. Verse 12, "Zacharias was troubled." It's the Greek word *tarassō*. It means deeply disturbed. It means to be visibly shaken. His body begins to shake. He is stirred up. We would say in the vernacular today, "He is scared spitless when he saw the angel." And you know what? You and I would have responded exactly the same way. We would have just lost it.

And then he adds at the end of verse 12, taking us into this scene, "and fear gripped him." The word "fear," *phobos*, comes into the English language as "phobia." He is struck with phobia, dread. It's a dread that causes someone to want to take flight and just run away you're so terror stricken. And it says, "this fear gripped him," literally covered him, literally swallowed him up. He is immersed in fear and dread, and his heart is pounding, about to pound out of his chest cavity. His eyes are about to pop out of his head. His knees begin to buckle. His legs begin to weaken.

Verse 13, "But the angel said to him." Angels speak. Angels have a mind. They have affections. They have a will. They are brilliant. They are articulate. And the angel speaks to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias." I've been told that that's the most repeated command in the Bible, "Do not be afraid." I haven't added them all up, but it says something about our human frailty, does it not; that we're so easily troubled, we're so easily made anxious, we are so easily disturbed, that we have to be told again and again and again, "Do not be afraid."

In other words, God has this all under control. God has this in the palm of His hand. And he now gives the explanation, verse 13, "for your petition has been heard. This is why you should not be afraid. God's heard your prayers. God is answering your prayers." God is a prayer-hearing God. In

fact, the Bible tells us God knows what you're going to pray before you even pray it, Psalm 139.

But God wants to hear from us, and God wants us to approach Him in a relationship, but He already knows. And there's no prayer that we can bring before God that will update Him on any situation in our life with which He is not intimately aware and acquainted. So, what an encouragement: "Your petition has been heard." Let me make this personal for you. Whatever you prayed for last night, your prayer has been heard. Whatever you prayed for this past week, your petition has been heard, and it has been answered by God.

Now, what is this petition for? Well, in the context, it's obvious. They've been praying for a child. They've been praying probably for a son who will continue on in the ministry like his father Zacharias. And so, the angel says, "Your prayers for a child, even at this advanced age" - and this kind of parallels Abraham and Sarah - "has been heard." And God never has to have the circumstances just right to work. God can bring life out of a dead womb of an older age if that's what He purposes to do.

And he says, "Your wife" - verse 13 - "will bear a son. Elizabeth, you're going to have a son. Zacharias, you're going to have a son, not just a child, God who is the Creator appoints the gender of the child." Nothing is left to random occurrence. God in His sovereign design and sovereign will appoints the fact that you are a man, and that you are a woman; and that is God's right and God's prerogative and God's authority as the creator of heaven earth and the creator of all life to determine your gender, and God determined it before the foundation of the world.

And so, this announcement is really a declaration to Zacharias of the sovereignty of God over their lives, and that God is sovereign in the reproductive process. God determines if you will be barren or whether you will have a child. And God is sovereign when you will have that child. And God is sovereign what this child will be, whether it be a boy, or whether it be a girl. But God has appointed the birth of this child, the parents of this

child, the gender of this child, the mission of this child, and the destiny of this child. And what is true here is true for every child that is born. It's God alone who decides who your parents will be. Whether they were good parents or not so good parents, God dealt the deck and determined what your upbringing would be. But more than that, God determined the place, whether you'd be born in the United States, whether you'd be born on the other side of the globe. God determined the timing that you would be born in the 20th century or the 21 century. And more than that, God determined the gender that you would be.

There's a lot of talk today about transgenderism. And I want you to hear me say this, that it is evil, that it is a frontal assault on God who alone is the creator of life, and to reject the gender into which a person is born is of the devil. And at the very least, it is mental illness of a severe nature for you to think that you are a female trapped inside of a male body, or that you're a male trapped inside of a female body. Listen, the devil has sold you a bill of goods; and it really is atheism on steroids to believe that you need to change your gender. God is infinitely wiser than all of us put together in this room, and God knew exactly what He was doing when He made you to be either a man or to be either a woman. And any thoughts of changing that is not from the Creator Himself; and there's only one other source. I need to move on.

We come to verse 14. I want you to see the spiritual mission. Number five, "the spiritual mission," because this baby, John, who will be known as John the Baptist, he will have a very unique and special ministry, and he will bring about a special effect. And this, too, is an expression of the sovereignty of God, that the success of his ministry is already predetermined, and it will come to pass.

And so he begins in verse 14 by saying, "You," - referring to Zacharias; the angel is talking to Zacharias - "you will have joy and gladness." From what? From the birth of this baby. "This will be a bundle of joy and gladness for you." The word "joy" means great delight, overflowing bliss. And the word "gladness" takes it to another level; it's joy on steroids. It

refers to exuberant joy and excitement and exaltation. This is what John will bring to his parents.

But more than just them: "and many will rejoice at his birth." The "many" refer to those who will hear him preach, to those who will come under the power of the Holy Spirit as he preaches the word of God and calls them to repentance. It will be an extraordinary movement of God as a result of his ministry. And, again, this underscores even the primacy of the preaching of the word of God, that God sends a forerunner who will be a herald, who will proclaim and announce the coming of the King.

And so, we read in verse 15, "For" - "for" introduces an explanation - "he will be great in the sight of God." And that's really all that matters, that someone is great in the sight of God. And not great in the Chamber of Commerce or great in the eyes of even the Senate or the Congress. "To be great in the sight of God." He will be great in character, great in integrity, great in message, great in faithfulness, great in influence, great in humility. In fact, Jesus said of John that "he is the greatest who has yet been born of a woman."

In Matthew 11:11, Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, among those born of women," - and I said this weekend that pretty much covers the field - "among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!" Did you hear that? Greater than Abraham. Greater than Jacob and Joseph, Isaac. Greater than Moses. Greater than David. Greater than Isaiah. Why? Because he's given a greater mission and a greater ministry. He will be the one who will blow the trumpet to announce the coming of the King onto the scene of human history, the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But then, Jesus makes one more sentence in Matthew 11:11, and I want to read it: "Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." John is the greatest of all of women who've ever been born, yet there will be those who will be greater than John the Baptist. What does this mean? Well, John's greatness was found not only in his mission, but also in his humility, that John was always doing the work of pointing people to Christ.

He always took the lower position. In fact, he said in John 3:30, "He must increase, I must decrease." And John was willing to step back so that Jesus could step forward in this transition period of time, and it underscores the supreme virtue of humility, that this is what Jesus recognizes. The world does not recognize it. A humble person is just run over and rolled up in the world. But in the kingdom of God, this is who's greatest. "He who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted," Luke 18:14.

Really, humility is the key that leads to all other virtues. Only a humble person loves someone else rather than loves themselves. Only a humble person serves others rather than being self-serving. Only a humble person prays rather than relying upon his own abilities and talents. Only a humble person trusts God rather than trusting himself. No, John is great in the sight of God because he chose the lowest rung on the ladder and pointed people to Christ. And so it is the greatest mother, the greatest father, the greatest believer is the one who humbles himself to serve others.

So, verse 15. I need to comment on verse 15: "He will drink no wine or liquor." What does this mean? Well, this is not saying that you have to live with total abstinence in order to be great in the sight of God. I would remind everyone here today that Jesus made wine. Jesus made the best wine that's ever been made. Jesus served wine, Jesus drank wine, and Jesus will serve wine in heaven. And wine is in the Old Testament symbolic of the blessings of God upon a people.

So, what is this saying, "He will drink no wine or liquor"? This is referring to a Nazarite vow – you can read about it in Numbers 6:1-4 – by which someone can voluntarily take a vow that they will be narrower than what is required. It is like fasting, choosing to fast, that you choose to give up food for a period of time so that you can focus upon God and be focused in prayer, and that you choose to give up bodily pleasures and worldly pleasures for a specific purpose. That's what fasting is all about. And that's only for a short period of time, because no one can continue to live without actually eating.



But here, the reference is to a Nazarite vow. Like Samson took a Nazarite vow, that you will choose to be so dedicated to the Lord that you will give up your freedom and give up your liberty of what you can do before God, in order to – really, it becomes symbolic that you are totally dedicated to God. Now, this is not something that is imposed on everyone, but that everyone would choose to take this as this Nazarite vow. And so, John is so narrowly – to be narrowly focused on his mission to be the forerunner of Christ, that he will be narrower than even Christ Himself, as he is a forerunner to precede the coming of the Lord.

Now continue in verse 15, because here's another knot here that needs to be untied: "and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb." What does this mean? Well, I've been in Q&As before in large conferences and I will have people on this panel around me telling me that this means that John the Baptist was regenerated in his mother's womb. In other words, that he was born again before he was born. And I think that's a very incorrect interpretation of this passage.

And what this is saying is that God has marked him out from his mother's womb for this special calling. And I want to give you two cross-references that I think help buttress what I just said. In Jeremiah 1:5, God says to the prophet Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you as a prophet to the nations." That means before the prophet Jeremiah was born in the womb, God had already predetermined what would be his calling and what would be his ministry and what would be the assignment that would be entrusted to him. And it is not something that evolved over time, God already had it mapped out for the prophet.

And we read the same concerning the apostle Paul. In Galatians 1:15-16, Paul writes, "God set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace. He was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the nations." I see this is a parallel statement to Jeremiah and the apostle Paul, that John's path was already marked out for him by God before he was born, and that John's life is set apart by God for this special mission, and that John's life is hemmed in and under the control

of God, that God has laid His hand in a unique way upon John the Baptist. He will yet have to come to faith in Christ. He will yet have to believe the gospel. He himself will have to repent in order for him to preach repentance to others.

And John's life is sovereignly appointed by God for a special task while he is here on the earth. Only believers can be filled with the Spirit, and John is not a believer while he's still in his mother's womb. He is in sin. The sin of Adam has been imputed to him. He has been conceived with a sin nature. David said, "In sin did my mother conceive me, and I came forth from my mother's womb speaking lies." That's true of the entire human race, including John the Baptist. So let me just help you with how to interpret Scripture.

One of the key principles of interpreting Scripture - and I've told you this before, but I'm going to say it again - is never to take one verse and now see the whole rest of the Bible through just one verse, especially in a narrative passage, meaning a story. Instead, it's the other way around. If you want to understand what this one verse teaches, the whole rest of the Bible must bring its testimony and give us understanding. The tail is not wagging the dog, the dog is wagging the tail.

And so when we read the whole rest of the Bible, we would never come up with a cockeyed interpretation that John the Baptist is regenerated in his mother's womb. No. Even John the Baptist must be born again. This is simply signifying that God's hand is upon him, an invisible hand, and that God has marked out his path in a very deterministic way, in a very strong way.

And then he concludes inverse 16, "And he" - John - "will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God." This is a preview, a foreview of the ministry of John the Baptist, that he will be a preacher of repentance, and he will call people to turn back to God. That's what repentance is. All true, saving faith has repentance in it.

Before we repent, we are going in one direction. We are going according to the course of this world, we are going down the narrow path, we are headed for eternal destruction; and when we repent, we do 180 and we turn around completely and we're now headed in a new direction down a new path. We now have repented. That's what it means to repent.

And so, John will call the nation to repentance, because at this time Israel is an apostate nation. They are uncircumcised of heart. They are stiff-necked. They are religious but lost. And John will be an evangelist, and he will go out into the wilderness, and they will come flocking out to hear him because they've never heard a preacher like this before. It's been 400 years since God has sent a prophet. And he will call the nation to repent. He will call them to make straight the way of the Lord, to lift up the low places, to lower the high places, to make straight the crooked ways. Those are all metaphors and analogies for repentance.

And I must say to you, God's message to each one of us is to repent. No one enters the kingdom of God who has not repented. True saving faith has repentance in it. It is a repentant faith. And if all you've done is just walked an aisle and raised a hand and signed a card and been dipped in water and that's it, and you just continue to live the same way you've always lived and you just keep going down this path, and there was no dramatic change in your life, you're not in the kingdom of God, because repentance is at the heart of the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That was the message of Jesus: "Repent!" It was the message of the apostles: "Repent!" It was the message of the prophets: "Repent!"

And so, this is the message that God has given to John the Baptist. And it's not an easy message, because the listener must come to the awareness, "I've been living wrong. I've been going in the wrong direction."

So, verse 17 and we're finished: "It is he," John. This is still the angel talking to Zacharias. "It is he who will go." Please note that word "will." That's a word of divine certainty. Not could, should, would, may. No, he will. "He will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord, and he will

go as a forerunner before Him" - the Messiah - "in the spirit and power of Elijah."

Elijah was turbocharged by the Spirit of God. He confronted the prophets of Baal. He preached, and God brought fire down from heaven and consumed the Baal worshipers in the sacrifice. And at the end of the Old Testament in Malachi 4:5-6, it said that "there will be the coming again of Elijah." And what that means is one will come in the spirit and in the power of Elijah, and he will be a voice who will be crying in the wilderness, "Seek the Lord while He may be found and call upon Him while He is near."

And it says in verse 17, "to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children," these fathers who are lost, these fathers who are hardhearted, these fathers who are uncircumcised of heart, these fathers who have been cruel and have been dominant with their children without any love. "He will turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children." And the fathers will be humbled and their hearts will be melted. And when they go back after hearing John the Baptist preach and they go back home, God's brought a new father for the children, because he has repented of his sin. And now there is a gentleness and a loving spirit with the father and patience.

"And the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." After centuries of dead religion, after centuries of Pharisees and scribes and Sadducees, after centuries of just going through empty motions of ritual with no meaning and no life, there must be a strong voice who will address the people and confront them with their unbelief and call them to repent. That man was John the Baptist. And to this point, there's never been a greater man ever born on the earth than John the Baptist, because of the mission that God gave to him.

As I bring this to conclusion, a simple question for you, but a profound question. However you answer this question will depend upon where you will spend eternity: "Has your heart been turned to the Lord?" Not your feet; you're here in church, your feet have brought you here. Not just your hands; you may be doing and serving. Has your heart been turned 180

degrees away from this evil world system? Has it been turned away from your own self-righteousness and your own sinful pursuits? Have you turned to the Lord and have you called upon His name? Have you thrown yourself upon His mercy? Have you believed in His Son the Lord Jesus Christ?

And if you will turn, He will receive you. And so, it's either turn or burn. Turn or burn. Turn to the Lord and be saved, and escape what is yet to come. He will gladly receive you. He will not turn you away. He says, "Him who comes unto Me I will in no wise cast out." He's the friend of sinners. He's come as a physician for those who are sick, not for those who are well. Just tell Him how sick you are. Tell Him how much you need His forgiveness. And He will wash you and cleanse you, and then clothe you with His perfect righteousness. He's a gracious, loving Savior.

If you have never done that, do this today, this moment, before you leave this room, before you get in your car to go back. You cannot afford to be wrong about this. Let us pray.

[Prayer] Father in heaven, we thank You for Your grace, Your mercy, Your forgiveness that You have lavished upon us in Christ. Unworthy as we are, we humble ourselves before You, and we thank You that in reality it was You who turned our heart to You. Bless now Your people, in Christ's name. Amen. [End]

Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.