

Elizabeth: Expecting the Unexpected

Luke 1:5-25

From Brokenness to Blessing Christmas Series

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“True brokenness is a lifestyle – a moment-by-moment lifestyle of agreeing with God about the true condition of my heart and life – not as everyone else thinks it is but as He knows it to be.”

– NANCY LEIGH DEMOSS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- NEXT SAT: REHERSAL 10AM, LUNCH 12PM, LEXINGTON 2PM
- NEXT SUN: DERYK HAYES AM, AND 5PM IS THE CANTATA
- BABY DEDICATIONS: DATE NOT FIRM, BUT LET ME KNOW.

Open your Bible to **Luke 1:5-24**. We are considering how God brings us from brokenness to blessing. This week we are looking at Elizabeth. Next week we will have Bro. Deryk Hayes back. I'll be here, but I'm having surgery on my right shoulder this Friday. This morning we are looking at a message I've entitled: "Expecting the Unexpected."

What we are going to learn today is that God is actively at work for good in each one of the lives of His people even when things look very bleak. Paul put it this way in **Romans 8:28**, "we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

We are going to find that a forgotten older couple, both in the family of the Levitical priesthood, are used by God in an amazing way to bring forth the forerunner of the Lord. Let's read about it in Luke 1:5.

Luke 1:5-25, "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. ⁶And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

God is actively at work for good in each one of the lives of His people. As in the cases of Job and Joseph, and many others, we are often not aware of it.

Today we are introduced to Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah. As you know there are 400 silent years between the closing of the book of Malachi and the beginning of the New Testament. The silence is broken in Luke 1, when the angel Gabriel (Lk. 1:19) appears to a very aged priest named Zechariah to inform him that his aged wife is going to conceive a son that is going to be the forerunner of the Messiah.

Outline

We see four unexpected things...

- An Unexpected Couple (5-7)
- An Unexpected Angel (8-14)
- An Unexpected Baby (15-17)
- An Unexpected Blessing (18-25)

I. An unexpected **Couple** (1:5-7).

Herod the Great

So the first event that takes place to begin the New Testament is a visit by the angel Gabriel. Zechariah was in the marvelous Herodian temple. This temple was a marvel of the ancient world. Jerusalem was a back woodsy town until Herod “the Great”, who was an architectural genius, took power and employed thousands of workers to remake and remodel the Jerusalem Temple.

So all of this took place as verse 5 says: “In the days of Herod, king of Judea.” Now Herod here is called Herod the Great. And King of Judea would mean that he ruled over the region of the Jews. He’s not the Caesar, he’s not Caesar Augustus. He’s not the highest-ranking governmental official. But he is a provincial king and he would’ve been called King of the Jews, a title that was later mockingly given to Jesus Christ. He is a very interesting man indeed.

Herod as you know is a descendant of Esau. He is extremely intelligent. He is a power broker. His life’s project is the expansion of the Second Temple, originally built under Ezra. Now he has expanded it so much that it is an architectural marvel of the ancient world. It has now put Jerusalem on the map.

An Evil Man: But Herod is an unbelievably cruel man. He murders lots of people. He is so paranoid and controlling that he would send out spies to eavesdrop on the conversations of people in the cities. He outlaws free speech and free assembly. You weren’t even allowed to get together and talk about him, and if you did, he just killed you. He would dress up in peasants’ garb and he would go out to eavesdrop on the citizens. It got to the point where he just murdered so many people and political opponents that there was a great public outcry.

A Brilliant Man: And, he is a man who enjoyed many palaces. He had safe houses and he had places of refuge and he built multiple palaces for himself. He made a name for himself through the building projects that he devised. He was truly a genius of architecture. This is the context of our story.

Jerusalem: 100,000 People

All of this takes place in and around the Temple in Jerusalem. in Jesus’ day, it was a huge town, maybe 100,000 people. And that doesn’t seem like a big deal to many of us who are familiar with modern urbanization. But, when you read of other cities and towns in the Bible, you read that Peter’s from Capernaum, or Jesus is from Nazareth. You go there, these are small rural towns. These are towns that have 50 or 100 or 200 people at most.

Jerusalem at our present day is a 3000 year old city. There are actually 10 layers of past civilizations that have lived in Jerusalem to this day that archaeologists are still unearthing. A very famous and important city.

But Zechariah likely lives in a small back woods town. There were 18,000 priests, that's not a big deal. They were priests, yeah everyone is. It's not a big deal. He wasn't a big priest at the temple. He was a little priest down in the woods. They subdivided the priesthood of 18,000 into 24 divisions, 750 men each. And they'd each get to go to Jerusalem for one week, two times a year to minister at the temple, two weeks a year. And they would all come together and they would roll dice to see who got to do the big job. The big job was, go in, throw some incense on the coals, and say a prayer. That was it. Once you got to do it, you were done for life. They declared you holy and blessed. You never got to do it again. This is it.

Elizabeth

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.”

So here we meet Elizabeth, a very popular name even in ancient days. It means “God’s promise” or “oath of God.” Like her husband, Elizabeth was in Aaron’s lineage, which made her a fine catch since marrying a woman of priestly ancestry was a special blessing.¹

Among her many tasks Elizabeth kept her husband’s priestly garments in good repair and welcomed visitors into their home to discuss temple matters.²

Division of Abijah

Luke 1:5a, “In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah.”

They are from the division of Abijah, traveling from an unnamed town in the hill country of Judea. They are Mr. and Mrs. Nobody from a nowhere.

Abijah was just one of twenty-four divisions, so there were lots of priests. Since the time of Aaron, their duties included handling various offerings, giving thanks, and singing praises at the gates of God’s dwelling place. A worthy calling, though with so many priests, few were singled out for ministry within the temple’s Holy Place. They are unknown, but faithfully fulfilling their duties before God.

Luke 1:6, “⁶And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.”

We know this couple. We’ve seen them at church, exchanged smiles in the parking lot. Happily married people, busily serving the Lord, always doing good. After such cheery news about Elizabeth and her hubby in the opening verses, it’s time for the other shoe to drop. When God’s blessings are piled on our heads, it’s easy to be faithful. The real test comes when disappointment calls and sorrow pulls up a chair.

Luke 1:7, “But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.” Even with all their goodness and righteousness, sadness had crept into their home. In their world children were seen as God’s reward for faithful service.

Infertility in the ancient world was often looked upon by the Jews as a punishment for some sin committed. Elizabeth was the one marked as “barren” (ASV). How often had Elizabeth

¹ Tremper Longman III, Mark L. Strauss, and Daniel Taylor, contributors, *The Expanded Bible: Explore the Depths of the Scriptures While You Read* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), note on Luke 1: 5.

² Edith Deen, *All of the Women of the Bible* (New York: Harper and Row, 1955), 168.

heard that stark word whispered as she passed by? Some women surely had pity in their eyes, others a certain disdain, wondering what Elizabeth had done to displease God.

In days of old the woman bore full responsibility. “Elisabeth’s infertility” (PHILLIPS) was the problem. She was the one marked as “barren” (ASV). How often had Elizabeth heard that stark word whispered as she passed by? Some women surely had pity in their eyes, others a certain disdain, wondering what Elizabeth had done to displease God.

Though disappointed and quietly suffering, Elizabeth held on to God’s promises and clung to the fact that she was God’s daughter, all the while waiting, praying, and listening.

Mr. and Mrs. Nobody

So in this passage we meet Zechariah, he’s nobody, and Elizabeth, she’s Mrs. Nobody. Here’s what we know about Elizabeth. She’s from the line of Aaron so she comes from a ministry family, generations of ministers. Her name means, “God’s oath.” Zechariah’s name means, “the Lord remembers.” What do know about them so far? They seem to be forgotten. They are old – “advanced in years” (Lk. 1:18) We don’t know how old they are, but in that day the Levites, according to Old Testament requirements, had to retire from ministry at 50. So, anything over 50 still in ministry is old. He’s a priest. For whatever reason, Zechariah is not forced to retire at 50 like the Levites are. But, let’s say he’s 60, 70 years old. He’s old. She’s old too.

The Privilege of Burning Incense

The New Testament is clear that most of the priesthood at this time were corrupt and self serving, who made merchandise of the people, but among them, we find a godly priest, Zechariah, and his godly wife, Elizabeth. Zechariah loved God and it was his highest privilege to officiate the worship of God at the Temple.

A very special day came in the history of redemption. There were certain activities that had to be performed every day by the priests. One of those things was to burn incense on the Altar of Incense, inside the Temple.

The Temple was composed of a massive plaza called the “court of the Gentiles.” Inside of that was a walled enclosure called the Court of Women, for Jewish women and underage boys, and inside of that was another walled enclosure called the Court of Israel, for Jewish men to worship God. This is where the Temple was located. The Temple was composed of two compartments: the Holy place, and then the Holy of Holies (beyond the veil) where the high priest offered a sacrifice once a year.

Twice a day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon, there was a very special sacrifice: the burnt offering. As part of the burnt offering which took place outside the temple on the altar of burnt offering, there would be an offering of incense. Each day a priest would be selected by lot (by drawing straws). There were 18,000 priests in and around Jerusalem at this time in Israel.

So each day, one priest would be selected to take some of the coals from the altar of burnt offering and go into the holy place where there was a little square altar there. This day, Zechariah would scrape those coals onto that little altar in the Holy Place and then he would douse the coals with sweet smelling incense, which would produce a very sweet smelling smoke, representing the prayers of God’s people.

Once a priest was selected to do this, he was never eligible again. With 18,000 priests, some were never given the opportunity for this high honor. Zechariah was an aged priest, and I

imagine during the years with his duty at the Temple, he would gather with the other priests and wait for the lot to fall on him but it never fell on him until this day.

It must have been with tremendous excitement that Zechariah began his sacred duty in the Holy Place. Little did he know that he would not be alone there in the Holy Place. The Angel Gabriel would be there to give him a remarkable promise.

II. An unexpected **Angel** (Lk. 1:8-14).

Luke 1:8-11, “Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

Here’s Zechariah’s big moment. He comes in, one time opportunity, drops his incense, closes his eyes, prays, I believe, for two things:

1. God please deliver our nation, send the one that Malachi promised, send our Savior. Get us out from Herod.
2. God, please give me and Elizabeth a baby like you did Abraham and Sarah. Amen.

Zechariah opens his eyes. Here’s what happens. Verse 11-12, “¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

It’s a big day! I mean, here’s his whole life: drop the incense. See, for him, that’s it. This is a big deal. An angel shows up. You know it’s going to get good.

The Message from Gabriel

Luke 1:13-15a, “¹³ But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord...”

The name John means, “God is gracious.” That’s true. The angel shows up. Angels are mentioned 23 times in Luke.

John Will Be Great

“He will be great before the Lord” (verse 15a). This is good. Herod is the mighty king. He is Herod “the Great.” The angel says, “Not really. John will be great. Herod will make more money, build more buildings, subjugate more people, have more followers. But, he won’t give his life to humbly serving God. Your son will. And he’ll be the great one.” Friends, don’t let greatness be defined by the standards of the world and the people like Herod. If you love God and serve God and accept his providence in your life and walk with him faithfully, being and doing whatever he’s appointed for you, you are great in the sight of God. And the truth is, it’s only the sight of God that really matters.

Verses 18-19, “I am Gabriel”

¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence

of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.” This is quite unexpected! We need to expect the unexpected if we are faithfully serving the Lord.

III. An unexpected **Baby** (Lk. 1:15-17).

A Nazirite Vow, Numbers 6

The Angel essentially implied John would be a Nazirite from the womb. He would be one who was NAZIR – Hebrew for “consecrated” or “separated.”

Luke 1:15a-16, “for he will be great before the Lord. And he must **not drink wine or strong drink**, and ...

God is Pro-Life

Luke 1:15b-16, “...and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,

We are pro-life at Living Hope because God is pro-life. That’s not political. It’s biblical. People are made in the image and likeness of God. They’re endowed with dignity, value, and worth. And God honors them. God cherishes them from their mother’s womb. We are pro-life because God is pro-life.

Word for Baby

What we see here is, God says there’s a baby in Elizabeth’s womb. You’re going to read this coming up in the next few weeks, that the “baby leapt in the womb of a mother” (Lk. 1:44). That same word for “baby” is the same word for “children” who gather around Jesus later and sing “Hosanna, Hosanna!” So, the baby in the womb is the same as a five-year-old child who sings songs to Jesus. They’re all children in God’s eyes.

The Fulfillment of Prophecy: The Forerunner

Luke 1:17, “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.”

We come to learn that Zechariah and his aged wife were going to bear a child that would be the fulfillment of three Old Testament prophecies, two of which are in Malachi.

Malachi 3:1, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.”

Malachi 4:5, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.” The great and awesome “day of the Lord” would encompass the first and second comings of Christ. But before that came, Elijah would come.

The third prophecy is from **Isaiah 40:3-4**, “he voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be exalted And every mountain and hill brought low...’ This is the announcement that YHWH is coming. This baby born to Elizabeth would be this great forerunner, this one who announces the coming of YHWH in human flesh.

Jesus gave us this interpretation in Matthew 17:10-13, “the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” ¹¹ He [Jesus] answered, “Elijah does come,

and he will restore all things. ¹² But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.” ¹³ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.”

This was an unexpected baby!

IV. An unexpected Blessing (Lk. 1:18-25).

¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ 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.”

Go Home and Be Quiet and Wait

The angel just says, “You’re going to shut up now. [Laughter] You, you don’t need to say anything. You just wait patiently and God will open your wife’s womb. And unlike a complete miracle devoid of a husband, as Mary will experience, God will use the natural relations between you and your wife to open her womb as he did Sarah’s and you will give birth to a son. And until then you can just go home and be quiet.”

And so many of us sometimes you don’t need to say anything. You just need to be quiet and wait. “I don’t know what’s going to happen, I’m really, I’m really scared.” Just be still and know that He is God. Be quiet and just wait. “Well what if he doesn’t -?” Back to my first point, come on. Sometimes God’s people, they talk too much and they wait too little.

²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²² 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. ²³ And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

The Doctrine of Expiation

²⁴ After 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.”

Expiation emphasizes the removal of guilt through a payment of the penalty, while propitiation emphasizes the appeasement or averting of God's wrath and justice.

Nobody looked on Elizabeth. She’s nobody from nowhere married to a man who does nothing. She says, “You know what, God loves me and God knows me and God has kept his eye on me,” it’s true of all of us, “to take away my reproach among the people.” It’s the doctrine of expiation.

That word “reproach,” according to The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, it means that Elizabeth was reviled, that she was disgraced. That means a person without grace. That’s what disgrace means, that she was abused and that she was shamed. She suffered emotional, verbal, and spiritual abuse for 30, 40, maybe 50 years. The other religious and smug, ungracious women would consider her cursed of God. So, they would spread rumors about her.

“Oh, maybe she doesn’t love God. Maybe she’s not elect. Maybe there’s sin in her life, maybe her husband’s not as holy as he thinks he is.

Was God cursing her? No, he was just working out his sovereign plan; his answer was “later” and later finally came.

For those of you that are here and you’re like Zechariah, there’s sin, we want you to confess that to Jesus. This is all to prepare for the coming of Jesus. He died as a substitute in your place for your sins. And for those of you who are victims, you’ve been sexually abused, physically abused, verbally abused, you’ve been ripped off, cheated on, beat on, yelled at, you’re like Elizabeth.

Conclusion: In the Summer of 1979, my first pastor, Bill Schroeder of the Oak Forest Baptist Temple knocked on my door at 5900 Stuart Lane. It was a day that would change my life. I was five years old. He was faithful. He took the time to share the Gospel with me. He planted the seed of the Gospel in my family. That visit in 1979 would lead to me one day being sent out as a missionary in 2001, 22 years later. Who knew?

So the lesson this morning is that God uses faithful people. Through the brokenness, through the tears, we trust God. And God allows us to bear fruit in the every day pain and circumstances of life. It is in this way that God gets all the glory from ordinary people who are unexpectedly used by a gracious God!