



Sunday School Lesson for December 14, 2003.
Released on December 12, 2003.

Study Luke 1:67-80. John: Forerunner of Jesus
Questions and answers below.

TIME: 7 or 6 B.C.
PLACE: hill country of Judea

Luke 1:67-80

67 And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying,
68 Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people,
69 And hath raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David;
70 As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began:

71 That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us;

72 To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant;

73 The oath which he sware to our father Abraham,

74 That he would grant unto us, that we, being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear,

75 In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.

76 And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways;

77 To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins,

78 Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us,

79 To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

80 And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel.

Lesson Background

Luke the physician was a missionary companion of the apostle Paul (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24). He was not one of the twelve apostles and perhaps had no direct contact with either John the Baptist or Jesus during their ministries. But Luke had investigated carefully the facts about the "things which are most surely believed among us" (Luke 1:1). The Holy Spirit chose just the right person to document the facts of the birth and ministry of John the Baptist.

After introducing the purpose of his gospel (Luke 1:1-4, Luke begins his narrative with the Heavenly announcements of the coming births of both John (1:5-25) and

Jesus (1:26-38), the details of those births (1:57-66; 2:1-38), and the poetic, worshipful praise of both Mary and Zechariah (1:46-55, 67-79). Luke describes Zechariah and Elisabeth as upright in their worship of the Lord, but Elisabeth was barren and they were praying for a son (Luke 1:5-7, 13).

The Angel Gabriel appeared to Zachariah, her husband, and reported that they were going to have a baby boy. Zachariah was so stunned by the news that he could not believe it and questioned Gabriel about the validity of the message. As a result, Zachariah was struck speechless until after the birth occurred. This, along with Elisabeth's condition, caused everyone in the neighborhood to be aware of what was happening in their lives.

When John was born, therefore, the relatives and neighbors all assumed the child would be given the same name as his father; so when Elisabeth announced that his name was John, they asked Zachariah through signs what he thought. As soon as he had written, "His name is John" (Luke 1:63), Zachariah was suddenly able to speak again.

Praise for Deliverance (Luke 1:67-75)

After John is born, Zechariah is again able to speak (1:57-64). The neighbors want to know, "What manner of child shall this be?" (1:66). Zechariah responds with a prophecy that reveals some of God's plan of salvation.

1. Zechariah, a highly educated and well-trained priest, was taken by complete surprise by the angel's message. What does Zechariah 's experience teach us about God and ourselves?

God does not live in boxes created by people, whether those boxes are "physical" (Acts 17:24, 25) or "mental." When we begin a thought with the words, "Surely, God would not ..." then we start down a dangerous path of putting Him in one of those "mental boxes" we all are tempted to construct from time to time.

Even so, when we begin to learn more about God we may be able to recognize some ways that He definitely will not act just because it would be inconsistent with His holy nature. But we should be careful not to step beyond a certain point. Unless God makes a promise never to respond in a certain way-such as flooding the earth again-He maintains both the ability and the right to use whatever means He needs to accomplish His ends. When He does act, will we respond with more faith than Zechariah.

2. What was Zachariah's first action following the restoration of his ability to speak (vs. 67,68)?

We need to note that his utterance came as a result of his being filled with the Holy Spirit, which should be an encouragement to all of us. While he had previously doubted and been disciplined by the Lord, he was still usable to God because of his submissive attitude.

Luke 1:68 can be viewed as a call to praise followed by a reason for the praise. The word "blessed" translates a Greek word that means "to speak well of." Whenever we say "Praise the Lord," we are in effect not only uttering our own feelings but also asking our listeners to join us in thinking and speaking well of God. Although He is always worthy of our praise, we are made especially cognizant of it when He sends a

special blessing our way. At a time like that, we lift our hearts and voices in praise to Him.

3. Why was the birth of John cause for so much rejoicing on his father's part?

Zachariah's reason for the praise was that God had visited and redeemed His people. John's birth signified the earthly inception of God's long-anticipated program of redemption for Israel. It was indeed a cause for great rejoicing.

4. Why was Christ referred to as a "horn of salvation" (Luke 1:69)?

Beginning with verse 69 and going through verse 75, Zachariah described the deliverance of Israel that would come through the Messiah. In verses 76 through 79, he described prophetically what kind of ministry John was going to have. He began his description by saying God had raised up a "horn" of salvation for His people. Horns signified an animal's strength or power. The Messiah was going to be powerful and fully capable of bringing to Israel the deliverance she needed so badly.

We notice immediately that Zachariah's song was not so much about his son as it was about the Messiah for whom his son was the forerunner. John was going to be a very influential person, but he would not have the power and authority suggested by the words "horn of salvation" (Luke 1:69). Besides, Zachariah and Elisabeth were Levites, and the horn of salvation came from the house of David, who was of the tribe of Judah. He had been given the promise that from his seed would come One who would establish his kingdom, house, and throne forever (II Sam. 7:12-16). That particular promise had come to David through the Prophet Nathan.

The "holy prophets" (verse 70 of our lesson text) refer to those whom God allowed to foresee, many hundreds of years earlier, the future ministry of the Messiah. The phrase since the world began can be translated more literally as "from of old." The first of these ancient prophets was Samuel (Acts 3:24), as we saw last week.

Examples of prophecies of Christ are found in Isaiah 42, 49, and 53. Those who will listen carefully to these teachings will begin to see how such prophecies describe a Messiah who comes to restore Israel's spiritual awareness of God's will, and that this Messiah has to suffer and die in this cause. For centuries the Jews had heard from their prophets of the coming of the Messiah. The apostles also taught these things (see Acts 2:22-37).

5. What do we understand about this deliverance that Zachariah probably did not fully comprehend (v. 71)?

In this context Zachariah uses the term "saved" to speak of political deliverance of the nation from bondage to the Gentiles (under Roman government).

One wonders if Zachariah might have had in mind the deliverance of Israel from Egypt under Moses. In Moses' day the people had cried out to God for deliverance from bondage, and God had sent Moses as their deliverer. Now it appeared that God had once again sent a deliverer, but this time He would be the long-awaited Messiah of Israel, of whom Zachariah's son was the forerunner.

From our perspective we understand that there was much more intended for Israel than political deliverance. The salvation being offered was much more important than their being free from the control of another nation. God in His infinite wisdom was

providing eternal salvation through His Son. It may well be that eventually Zachariah came to understand this. At the moment of rejoicing over the birth of his son, however, he focused on the concept of deliverance and salvation that was the most meaningful to him.

In step with the thoughts of Zachariah, let us not fail today to thank the Lord for the peace our nations have enjoyed even after "9-11". Unfortunately, we get complacent and frequently neglect the admonition of Scripture to pray for "kings, and for all that are in authority" so that each believer may lead "a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" (1 Timothy 2:2).

6. What is this "mercy promised" as we know it today (vs. 72-75)?

Zachariah had mentioned God's mercy in remembering His holy covenant with Israel in verse 72. Now he referred to that as an oath that God had made with their father Abraham. This is a clear reference to what we know as the Abrahamic covenant, as found in Genesis 12, 13, 15, and 17. This covenant forms the basis for God's relationship with Israel and for their centuries-long hope for the coming Messiah. God gave this covenant to Abraham in several phases.

When Zachariah spoke of God's remembering His holy covenant with Abraham, he thought of his present-day situation and looked forward to Israel's being freed from Rome. One day, though, Israel will be totally freed from all Gentile domination and will be given the heart and desire to worship God fully and freely.

Holiness and righteousness will then prevail because of the work God will be doing in their hearts. The details of this are included in passages that explain what we call the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). Zachariah no doubt had knowledge of this; so he was not speaking in ignorance, even though he did not understand the full time frame involved in God's plan.

7. In Luke 1:74, Zechariah reminds the people that the deliverance promised to the Israelites comes with an expectation of service. What are some expectations that come as we begin our relationship with the One who has saved us from our sins? How do these change our lives?

One convenient way to sum up our Savior's expectations is with the three words "inreach," "upreach," and "outreach." Our "inreach" includes personal growth in faith and holiness (1 Peter 1:15, 16), and the teaching of our fellow Christians (Romans 12:7). Our "upreach" is worship of God (John 4:24). Our "outreach" is evangelism (Matthew 28:19, 20) and mercy to others (Galatians 6:10). Living up to God's expectations means that we abandon our old lives and begin to "walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). That means a change in priorities, attitudes, relationships, and service.

Prediction of Ministry (Luke 1:76-80)

Zachariah turns now from praising the Lord to prophesying through the Spirit what the ministry of both John and Jesus will mean.

8. What was John's special mission (vs. 76, 77)?

Zachariah had a thorough grasp of Old Testament Scriptures (vs. 70-75). After reflecting on the truths he knew, he moved in his thinking to what his new son, John, was going to be doing relative to what he was anticipating from the Messiah. In doing so Zachariah gave his son the title of "the prophet of the Highest" because he would prepare the way for the Messiah.

While Old Testament priests spoke to God on behalf of the people, the prophets spoke to the people on behalf of God. John was to communicate a message from God to the people of Israel in his generation "To give knowledge of salvation" (v. 70). What was unique about his prophetic role that was not true of any previous prophet was that while they all anticipated the Messiah's coming, he would be the one to actually introduce Him. A higher calling than this does not exist. We should keep that in mind as we have opportunities to introduce Christ to those who are lost.

It was John who would have the opportunity to explain salvation to his people. He would be able to assure them that the remission of their sins was possible. The Messiah had come and was willing to receive them and forgive them of those sins! While we cannot literally fulfill the role John did, we do have the privilege of telling people that their sins can be forgiven and they can be certain of eternal life.

9. For various reasons many first-century Israelites were hesitant to accept the "knowledge of salvation" from the lips of Jesus and John the Baptist. What are some roadblocks we should be prepared to overcome today as we spread the gospel to a skeptical world?

One big roadblock is simple unconcern to the gospel message. Another roadblock is "postmodern" thinking that holds truth to be relative to each person. Still another roadblock is competition from cults and false religions. Yet another roadblock is the arrogance of those who refuse to listen to anything that challenges their set-in-concrete thinking patterns. There are other roadblocks as well!

Each type of roadblock requires a different, specific approach. But in a general sense we start to overcome each roadblock the same way that Jesus challenged wrong thinking in His day: with grace and truth (John 1:14). The historical, objective evidence of the miracles, fulfilled prophecy, and the resurrection of Jesus provide the truth. Our graciousness will be apparent in our gentle, humble approach.

10. What is the significance of the "dayspring from on high" (v. 78)?

"The dayspring from on high" refers to the rising sun; this is a figure of speech for Jesus Himself, the One whom John heralds. As that dayspring or rising sun, Jesus is the light who dawns on both Jew and Gentile (Isaiah 9:1, 2; 42:6; 49:6; 60:1-3; Matthew 4:16; Luke 2:32). The earlier reference to a "visit" from the Lord (Luke 1:68) gave us a vivid picture of God's personal attention to bringing about His program of salvation and redemption; now the figure of a rising sun communicates the bright hope of forgiveness that is granted from the Heavenly Father to a world stumbling in darkness (v. 79).

In this connection Zechariah speaks of the tender mercy of our God. Without this mercy there would be no forgiveness of sins. Zechariah's magnificent words remind us that God's motivation for sending the Messiah and the forgiveness of sins that came through His ministry is the mercy of God's own heart. No better reason can be named for coming before the Lord in worship than to honor the merciful God who is

moved to send to sinners a remedy for their sin. Here is the "God so loved the world" of Zechariah's prophecy. As believers sing the beloved carols of Christmas at this time of year, how appropriate that we raise our voices in praise to the merciful God who wants us to have this deliverance!

11. What does Luke mean by waxed strong (v. 80)?

This is the kind of observation we might expect from Luke the medical doctor. Luke did not emphasize John's physical growth as much as he did his spiritual growth. He simply said that John grew, but he added the fact that he "waxed strong" (Luke 1:80) in his spiritual development. The Greek word translated "waxed strong" means to empower or increase in vigor. No doubt this explains the effectiveness of John's later ministry. His was no average growth of spirit; rather, it was a vigorous growth. By the time he entered public ministry, he was spiritually strong and ready for its challenges.

When Matthew first mentioned John in his Gospel, he stated that John came preaching in the wilderness of Judea (3:1). After giving the essence of John's message, Matthew quoted from Isaiah 40:3, showing that it had been prophesied that John would be a voice in the wilderness preparing the way for the Messiah. So important was this fact that each of the Gospel authors quoted this same verse (Mark 1:2,3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23). Apparently, according to Luke 1:80, John spent much time by himself in the wilderness prior to his introduction to the public.

Any person who expects to have an effective ministry reaching others must spend large quantities of time alone with God in preparation. John serves as one of our best examples of that.

CONCLUSION

We must be available to God to be trained for His work and sometimes be content with a secondary role so that He can use us most effectively.

PRAYER

Lord of my salvation, may I offer as much praise today as Zechariah offered, though he saw only the beginning of Your plan of redemption, and I have seen much more. May this make me humble and obedient. In Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God had a plan for Zechariah, Elisabeth, and John—and God has a plan for you!

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

In our lesson next week, we will look at the greatest gift the world has ever received. It is a familiar passage, but its message is one that should never be taken for granted. Study Matthew 1:18-25.

I hope you enjoyed this week's lesson !

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