

Birth of John **Luke 1:57-80**

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. (English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- Neighbors customarily joined in celebrations like a birth, especially an unusual one like this; and circumcision of a son in the family home (typically performed by the father in this period) were such occasions. Jewish tradition suggests that guests assembled every night from a boy's birth to his circumcision.
- The Law of Moses required that circumcisions be performed on the eighth day, and Jewish custom included a charge to raise the child according to biblical law. Traditionally, Jewish infants were named at birth, but Roman infants were named either eight (girls) or nine (boys) days after birth. Luke may either accommodate the Greco-Roman practice for his readers or, more likely, he indicates the Greco-Roman influence on a Palestinian Jewish custom.
- Children were often named for grandfathers and sometimes for fathers. The father rather than the mother had ultimate say in the matter. In Roman (as opposed to Jewish) society, the father had the right to decide whether the family would raise the child or throw him/her into the trash.

- “Blessed be God” occurs in Old Testament praise (e.g. Psalm 41:13; 72:18; 1 Chronicles 16:36; 2 Chronicles 6:4), and became a standard opening prayer for Jewish blessings. The use here of “redeem” compares this new event to when God saved his people from Egypt. The prophets had promised future deliverance in a new exodus.

- “Horn of salvation” parallels the meaning of “rock” and “strength” in Psalm 18:2; therefore, the Messiah from the lineage of David would be their deliverer (Psalm 132:17).

“Prepare his way” alludes to Isaiah 40:3 (predicting the herald of a new exodus), and perhaps to Malachi 3:1 (probably connected with Elijah in 4:5).

- Future “salvation” in Isaiah includes deliverance from political oppressors. However, as this passage indicates, it is predicated upon Israel’s restoration to divine favor through forgiveness.

- “Sunrise” could allude to God as the Sun of righteousness in Malachi 4:2 (also Psalm 84:11). Some commentators have suggested a Greek play on words referring to the Messiah as both a “shoot” and a “star” in the Old Testament.

- The summary statement of John growing to become strong in spirit (Luke 1:80) is reminiscent of the prophet Samuel’s growth (1 Samuel 2:26; 3:19). The desert was the expected place for a new exodus led by the Messiah. Some Jewish groups, seeking greater purity (e.g. the Essenes), withdrew from common Judaism into the desert. The text does not say that John studied among such groups, but if his elderly parents died before he reached maturity, it is likely (the Essenes reportedly adopted children and trained them from age ten onward).

Questions:

- + In Hebrew the name, John (Jochanan), means “Jehovah-given” or “God has been gracious.” Why is Zechariah adamant that his son be named John? How does that name suit him?
- + What is the meaning of your first name, and to what extent (if any) does it suit you? If God gave you a name that suited you, what would it be, and how would it apply?
- + Of all that Zechariah says in his prophecy, what do you find most significant, and why?
- + According to the prophecy, what roles had God predetermined for John to fulfill in life? What roles might God have for you to fulfill in life? To what extent are you fulfilling them?
- + Whom or what may have helped John become “strong in spirit” during his formative years? Whom or what might help you become stronger in spirit? When and how will you respond?