



Unit .19

Session .02

John, the Herald, is Born

Scripture



Luke 1:59-73a, 76-79

59 And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, **60** but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” **61** And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” **62** And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. **63** And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered. **64** And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. **65** And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, **66** 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. **67** And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, **68** “Blessed be the

Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people **69** and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, **70** as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, **71** that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; **72** to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, **73** the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us ... **76** And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, **77** to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, **78** because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high **79** to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Intro Options



Main Point:
Like John, God calls
all Christians to point
to Jesus' arrival.

Option 1

Trust is an important part of making big purchases. When looking to buy new clothes, a new game system, a computer, or even a new car, the standard is high for people and products to gain our trust. Our ability to trust is directly correlated with our view of that person or product. If we hold them in high esteem (or we know of several others who do), we are more likely to trust them with our money. However, if the view of a particular brand or specific product is often slammed by others, it's going to take a steal of a deal for us to give them a chance.

Our ability to trust in the goodness of what God says to us is in direct correlation to our view of who He is. On this side of future glory, every one of us holds a distorted view of who God is. But exactly how distorted is it? God has revealed Himself to us, through the majesty and predictability of our universe, and especially through the pages of Scripture. We do not have to make a shot in the dark to get it right when it comes to who God is. Yet more often than not, when our view of God is off in big ways, it jams up our ability to trust in Him.

- **Have you ever misunderstood something about God or His character to only later see things differently according to Scripture? How does a right understanding of God lead to greater trust in Him?**

Option 2

Place students in groups of three to four. Make sure each group has at least one Bible. Then, tell the students to find at least two examples of people who responded in faith to God's call on their lives. After allowing adequate time for the students to find two examples, ask each group to share with the other groups. Then, ask:

- **What made their faith seem so extraordinary?**
- **How can we learn from their faithful response to God?**

One of the remarkable things about people who responded faithfully to God's invitation is the fact that they were normal people. Even more so, they were often young people! God has always used young people, who were faithfully willing, to play significant roles in His story of redemption.

However, not all people respond positively, much like ourselves sometimes. Instead, they initially respond in doubt and unbelief before finally coming around to seeing the big picture of what God is really up to.

TEACHING PLAN

Luke 1:6 tells us that Zechariah was a righteous man. This does not mean that he was without sin, but it does tell us that he was known to be a man with an outward obedience to the law of God. His wife Elizabeth, also declared righteous, was barren and now past the childbearing years. Likely zero hope remained in their hearts that they would ever become parents.

However, while Zechariah was at the temple altar, the angel Gabriel appeared to bring him incredible news: Elizabeth would have a child and this son would be a great servant of the Lord! Gabriel directed the frightened priest to name his forthcoming son John. However, Zechariah responded not in praise but in doubt. Instead of receiving this glorious news with faith—forgetting the power of the God of Abraham who brought forth Isaac from an old barren couple—Zechariah questioned the ability of God to do the same for him. And because of his faithless response, Zechariah lost his ability to speak. The power he denied was the same power that instantly took away his ability to speak. 

Read Luke 1:59-66.



The best way to deal with doubt is always to look at our heavenly Father. The greatest way for us to increase our faith is to increase our focus on who God is. Zechariah learned his lesson. The prophecy was fulfilled, just as the angel Gabriel had promised, and Zechariah's response was as it should have been all along: a declaration of trust and worship. Once we have seen and known the goodness and depths of God's grace, the natural next step is always praise.

▪ **What actions can we take this week to move away from a “flaky” faith toward a full-assurance faith?**

Mary, the soon-to-be mother of the Messiah, stayed with Elizabeth and Zechariah for three months. Both had received impossible conceptions and a powerful prophetic word about their respective, unborn children. At the first chance he could get Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied as to what God was doing.

Read Luke 1:67-73a.



Centuries have past since God made a covenant with the forefathers of the Hebrew people. The “prophets of old” had proclaimed the coming of a King who would rescue His people from bondage and make them into a great nation. Zechariah, a prophet himself, declared that this King had come. The waiting was over and God had not forgotten His promises.

Yet God did not send the long-awaited Messiah in the way His people expected. Instead of a commanding King, He came as a helpless baby to a humble family. He was not separated from the rest of the world by guards and pretenses. He lived among the common folk. He fished with them, ate with them, laughed with them, and cried with them.

▪ **How would Jesus' experience of humanity have changed if Jesus had been born into royalty instead of poverty?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
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Luke 1

8-9. Zechariah was a descendent of Levi and all Levite men were divided into groups who would take turns serving in the Jerusalem temple. There were twenty-four divisions, and each group served twice a year for one week. Tasks were assigned through the random casting of lots. This particular week, the lot fell on Zechariah to perform the burning of incense within the sanctuary. Most Levites never got to perform such an honored task. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity for Zechariah.

59-60. God followed proper timing. So did the parents. They followed the law and on the eighth day presented the child for circumcision (Lev. 12:3). The ceremony included officially naming the child. Neighbors assumed the obvious. First child, child of old age—naturally he would have no other name but his father's. So they agreed the boy was a new Zechariah. Elizabeth interfered. Not so! John is his name. Confusion erupted. That name appears nowhere on the family tree. Why would you do a thing like that? Let Dad decide. Still silent (vv. 20–22), Zechariah wrote the name John. Astonishment filled the room. Zechariah had learned his lesson. Do not ask why or how. Just obey God.¹

67-73. “God calls, liberates, and saves. At the ceremony for the birth of John, the Holy Spirit filled Zechariah's mouth with a prophecy about what God was doing for his people. God's people would be liberated and rescued from their enemies (Luke 1:71,74). That was to be John's message (Luke 1:76-77), that a Saviour was coming from King David's family (Luke 1:69). The Saviour would bring freedom not only from enemies but also from sin. Jesus came to give us salvation through the forgiveness of our sins (Luke 1:77). There are many who need this Good News today. Like John the Baptist, Christians should tell other people that God wants to rescue them. When we do this, the prophecies of Zechariah will be fulfilled.”²



99 Essential Doctrines (p. 16, DDG)

Angels

Besides the creation of humanity and animals, the Bible also speaks of other beings that God created—angels, who are also referred to in Scripture as “sons of God,” “holy ones,” “spirits,” “principalities,” and “powers.” In the original languages of the Bible, the word angel carries the meaning of a messenger, which indicates one of their primary reasons for existence. Angels carry out a number of other functions throughout Scripture: bringing God glory, carrying out God's plans and purpose, and reminding humanity that the unseen world is real.

TEACHING PLAN

Notice the tense Zechariah used here. God *has* visited. The Lord *has* provided. Zechariah understood that the long-awaited Messiah, the mighty horn of salvation, had already come. Through the filling and knowledge of the Holy Spirit, Zechariah proclaimed that the prophecies he and generations of Jews had waited to be fulfilled were indeed coming to pass in Mary's child. The tiny life developing in Mary's womb was the Christ. Rescue had come. Redemption was within reach. Right around the corner was victory.

- **How would you summarize your salvation story (or part of it) in a few sentences?**

Read Luke 1:76-79.



We see through this passage that God sent John for a very specific and special purpose. He was ordained to prepare God's people for some really big news: the Messiah had come! After four hundred years of silence, God's people needed some prep work in order for this reality to sink in. Some Jews may have given up on the idea that God would speak again. Many probably carried doubts that the promised Deliverer would ever come. God knew this. He recognizes our propensity toward disbelief and forgetfulness and He is constantly at work to help us receive the good news He has for us. God provided John to prepare the way for his cousin Jesus so that Jesus would become greater than he was.

- **When was a time in your life you can look back and see that God was preparing you to receive either good or bad news?**

Not only was John called to prepare the way for the Lord, he was also called to proclaim the good news of why the Messiah had come. As his father, Zechariah, rightly proclaimed, the tender mercies of God had arrived through the Most High, who brought salvation through the forgiveness of sins. Jesus came to illuminate our darkness and to guide us into peace with God.

We are each also called to serve as John did. We may not be ordained to cry out in the wilderness, but God has given each of us a specific work to do (Eph. 2:10). And though the details of the work God has for each of us might look different, all of our service contributes to the same purpose as John's: to prepare the way for others to know Christ. Whatever our specific calling, we should proclaim the name of Christ every opportunity we get. 

- **What are you doing to proclaim the truth about who Jesus is to the lost world around you?**

COMMENTARY

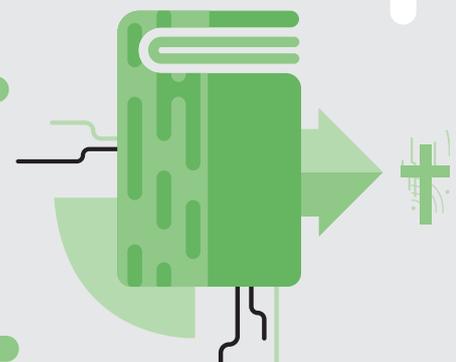
Main Point:
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Luke 1

76-79. “Zechariah now prophesies about John. John will be great. He will be called a prophet of God. He will be unique among the prophets because he will be the forerunner. He will soften the ground. He will till the soil of Israel’s heart. He will not be the Savior, but John will make things ready for the Savior by teaching people how they are to be saved. John will be a giant index finger pointing the way to God’s salvation from sin. Zechariah’s prophecy defines John’s life in relationship to Jesus’s life and mission. Beloved, all lasting meaning is found when we define our lives this way. Greatness comes from serving the Lord, not from serving ourselves. Greatness comes when we, like John, say, ‘We must decrease; Jesus must increase’ (see John 3:30). The prophet of salvation never replaces the bringer of salvation.”³

(p. 17, DDG) Christ Connection

When Zechariah trusted God’s Word concerning his son, his tongue was free to speak words of praise. Zechariah spoke of how his son, John, would be the herald pointing God’s people to the Savior who had been promised throughout the Old Testament. Jesus is the Word of God, the Savior to which John’s ministry pointed.



Our Mission

God's Story has always been designed to connect with our story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own. Suggested answers to these questions can be found on the right-hand side of the page for leaders.

Head



Read Luke 1:26-38. What contrasts do you see here between Zechariah's response to Gabriel and Mary's response?

What are some ways we can help ourselves and others to respond in faith to situations in life?

Heart



What can we learn about dealing with doubt in our lives by looking at Zechariah's response in Luke 1?

Why do we often give into the thought that God can do miracles in other people's lives but not our own?

Hands



How is John's calling to point to Jesus similar or different from the calling of all Christians?

What are some areas of your life where you have the opportunity to reflect Jesus to others?

Main Point: Like John, God calls all Christians to point to Jesus' arrival.



Head

Our response to God's work and involvement in our lives is important. When faced with a situation, whether positive or negative, our response to that situation is a reflection of who we are and whom we trust. Luke 1 contrasts two characters who, when faced with a similar situation, responded in different ways. Zechariah, on the one hand, and Mary on the other (though we didn't cover her encounter with Gabriel, it can be seen in Luke 1:26-38). Luke contrasts Zechariah's response of doubt with Mary's response of trust and obedience.

One of the important takeaways for us today is how we can not only be mindful of God's past goodness and grace in order to prepare ourselves to respond rightly when the time comes, but to help those around us remember as well. As the Church, we are called to strengthen one another by turning to the Scriptures, encouraging one another to hold fast to the truth and knowledge we know about God so that it influences the way we react to everyday situations.



Heart

Though we don't know the exact state of Zechariah's heart during his encounter with Gabriel, we can observe the response recorded: doubt. Hope is hard to hold on to when your view of God is small. Though everything in his immediate experience was screaming, "Trust in this powerful, personal God," it did not line up with Zechariah's ability to see God for who He truly is. This handpicked priest could not believe what he was hearing. All hope for a child had been laid to rest and the possibility of a pregnancy was completely lost with his hopeless heart.

Doubting God's Word when it feels like He is distant comes natural for us indeed. But when we focus more on His past faithfulness instead of His seeming silence, our response to God's Word will change. Unlike Zechariah, we have the full counsel of God before us in the Bible we hold in our hands. We stand on the side of history that can see and understand a much greater portion of God's story with His plan and purpose more illumined to us. We don't need angels to proclaim His plan to us. We only need to treasure God's Word in our hearts in such a way that we know who He is and who He is not. And as we hold fast to what the Bible tells us about God's good character, glorious grace, and perfect plan, trusting Him will become our default response to any surprising news.



Hands

When you think about it, John's call to make much of Jesus is the same calling of every Christian. We, too, are called to magnify His name and reflect His greatness in all aspects of our lives. This is extraordinary. In other words, one doesn't have to go into the ministry and become a pastor in order to accomplish this. It can be done in all sorts of professions, and even starts at an early age when you trust in Christ. As a student, you are called to reflect Jesus and point others to Him in all areas of your life—through your school work as a student, as a friend and classmate, as a teammate on the sports team, as a member of the school band, and so on. No matter what activity or hobby you find yourself doing in whatever season of life, your calling is clear—glorify Jesus and reflect His goodness wherever you are at.