

Bi132 The Gospels

Lesson Bi132-2 The Birth of John the Baptist

In our day escorts on motorcycles, police cars with sirens screaming, and officers directing traffic often let crowds know that an important person is coming. The road must be cleared. In ancient times rulers also sent messengers ahead before they came to visit a city. They moved with trumpeters and flags and someone proclaiming their name ahead of their royal procession. One reason was so the people would clear the way and prepare to honor their ruler at his arrival.

Before Jesus came to earth from heaven, there were no trumpeters or flags, but God arranged for the Jews to be prepared spiritually. He sent a forerunner named John, called ‘the Baptist.’ God, through John, announced the arrival of his Son. John would preach and baptize those who believed God’s message, and wanted to honor the One God was sending. John proclaimed, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. . . . I baptize you with water for repentance. But one more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matt 3:1, 11). This lesson tells the story of John the Baptist’s amazing birth. He prepared people’s hearts to receive the message of their Messiah, Jesus. Faith in Jesus is what God wants most from each person.

In the time of Herod king of Judea, there was an elderly Jewish priest named Zechariah. His wife was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, but Elizabeth was not able to have children. One day when Zechariah was chosen to go into the temple and burn incense, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. He was startled and gripped with fear.

The angel said, “Do not be afraid; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John, which means, ‘The Lord is gracious.’ Many will rejoice for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or fermented drink and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit before his birth. He will turn the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—he will prepare the way for the coming Messiah.”

Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this, for I and my wife are old?”

Consider this question for a moment: Which truth was Zechariah more concerned with, the message he received from the angel or what he believed about the ages of Elizabeth and himself?

The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to tell you this good news. Now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words.”

Meanwhile, the people outside, waiting for him to bless them, were wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them. When his week of service at

the temple was completed, he returned home. Soon his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and she stayed in seclusion for five months.

Elizabeth exclaimed, “God has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people” (Luke 1:11-25). When Elizabeth’s time came, she gave birth to a son. Her friends heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

On the eighth day the parents came to the temple to circumcise their son, as the Law of Moses required. The people thought they were going to name him Zechariah, but his mother said, “No! He is to be called John.”

They said to her, “There is no one in your family with that name.”

Then they made signs to his father to find out what he wanted to name the child. He took a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” Immediately he began to speak, praising God. All those present were filled with awe and wonder, asking, “What then will this child be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him (Luke 1:57-66).

God delights in confirming to his people what he is doing or will soon do. In this story God sent an angel to an unbelieving priest. The angel rebuked this leader for his lack of faith in God’s word, spoken through the angel. Zechariah had wanted assurance of the truth of the angel’s words. His inability to speak until the prophecy was fulfilled became God’s sign to him. When the people considered this whole story they determined not to forget these events. They saw that God was going to do something special through this child John.

This story is **important** because it shows us that even the conception of John was planned by God. God chooses people from before their birth to do the work he has planned for them. And often God chooses the most unlikely people to accomplish his tasks.

The **main truth** of this story is that God remembers his promises and will fulfill his plans. He delights in giving signs and miracles to confirm the truth of his Word.

Let’s **review** this lesson—

1. Who did God send in advance to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah?
A. [Pause for 5 seconds.] If you said "God sent John the Baptist to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah," you are correct.
2. What was the personal consequence for Zechariah of his unbelief concerning the message of Gabriel?
A. [Pause for 5 seconds.] If you said that the angel told him, “You will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens,” you are correct.
3. What was the response of the people when they learned about the promises concerning John’s birth?
A. [Pause.] If your response was, “The people said, ‘What then will this child be?’” you are correct.

Assignment: Practice telling this story until you can correctly repeat it to someone who has never heard about the birth of John the Baptist. After telling the story, ask this, “Why was it important that John’s birth happen following supernatural signs and wonders?” The answer is that the signs from heaven confirmed the truth of the angel’s message, to Zechariah, to his wife Elizabeth, and to the people around them. Even today, God still uses the supernatural to confirm his Word for those who may doubt it. Ask a friend or family member if they have ever seen a sign from God or tell them about something you have seen God do.