

## His Name Shall be Called – John

Christmas Cousins-Part 1

*Luke 1:5-25*

There are no manuals provided to new moms and dads in the delivery room on how to perfectly raise the perfect child.

And it isn't long until every new mother or father realizes they are in for the ride of their lives.

I've learned from our children's staff that around 60 babies were born this year to families who attend Colonial – 60 new babies this year in the nursery. And for 60 families – many of them parents for the first time, life has changed forever, right?

And do children ever think differently than you do – or not yet think at all – which takes some getting used to.

Someone from our congregation sent me that moment when their three-year-old was putting his shoes on all by himself and his mother noticed that he had put his shoes on the wrong feet. So she said, "Honey, your shoes are on the wrong feet." He looked down for a moment, then up at her with a strange look and said, "Mommy . . . I know these are my feet."

I was tipped off that parenting daughters wouldn't be quite the same on the very first day of kindergarten for our oldest daughter whose now 24. On her first day of school, I decided to walk her to her classroom – this was going to be one of those special daddy-daughter moment. As we walked from the parking lot – lunch box, backpack, new shoes – we saw there were news vans in the parking lot.

As we walked down the sidewalk, hand in hand, a man pointed his camera at us and snapped some pictures.

Now what probably looked like a sweet picture was far from it. You see, the whole way down the sidewalk my daughter was talking. But she wasn't saying, "Daddy, I'm so glad you spent these last few moments with me and it means so much to me that you're walking me in to school today . . . and I love you so much – I can't bear the thought of being away from you and Mom." Oh no . . . she was actually saying, "Daddy, would you please go back to the car. I can do this all by myself – I'm fine – please let go." And I'm saying, "Listen young lady, you might be fine, but I'm not . . . I'm taking you in there whether you like it or not."

When we got to her classroom there was a camera man from channel 5 inside the room with his camera focused on the classroom door. We ended up being filmed and put on the news that same day – we watched it later that night. It struck me – we were both smiling there at the door – but in reality, we were smiling for entirely different reasons. I was smiling because of this moment together and she was smiling because I was about to leave, and she could be on her own. That wasn't exactly how I pictured the moment.

Like that afternoon 20 years ago when our twins were around 5 years of age. My wife called me at the office with panic in her voice. She said, "Honey, one of your sons . . ." Now whenever she says they're one of my sons, I know it's going to get interesting. "She said, "One of your sons is in the backyard – in broad daylight – jumping on the trampoline, wearing his little sisters one piece bathing suit . . . what do I do?" I said, "Get the camera."

Take pictures now . . . we'll bribe him later!  
Oh, those are great pictures too and we have howled with delight over them.

When our twin sons were around 5 and their little sister was around 3 and ½ - our youngest hadn't been born yet, Marsha would have some of the day organized around the alphabet. This was her way to creatively survive 3 preschoolers.

And this particular day was G-day. And so the kids made gingerbread houses, dressed up and acted out animals that began with the letter G.

Then they were told that a wedding party included the letter G – G for groom.

So why don't the three of them dress up like a wedding party?

Benjamin evidently won the toss –as the oldest twin – and he got to dress up like the groom. But who would be the bride? Not little sister – oh no – she didn't get to vote.

Marsha took the picture; it's become a family classic.



You can see that Benjamin is wearing my suit coat which reaches down to his feet. He's not wearing a shirt. He has around his neck one of my favorite neckties – one of my *former* favorites!

And you'll notice that his brother is the blushing bride. There he is, wearing a white nightgown with some kind of fabric for a veil – and if you can see clearly enough – he's beaming behind that veil. He's happy about this . . . this is fun.

Their poor sister is relegated to Maid of Honor and she doesn't even get to hold the flowers.

Last year we gathered to give a couple's shower to our Benjamin and Caroline – his bride to be – and we put this picture up on the screen and our MC said to Caroline, "Listen, we really hate the break the

news to you at a time like this, but you need to know that Benjamin has been married before!"

This picture is now one of our family favorites.

So, for all of you new parents out there – you're in for the ride of your life . . . just don't forget your camera.

And you need to expect many of the pictures to look a little different than you anticipated.

When Malachi the prophet put down his quill, God put away the prophetic word. And for more than 400 years, the word from God was not heard.

When God finally spoke again – through his messenger Gabriel – two families lives were turned upside down.

One married woman who couldn't get pregnant would be told that she would be.

Her unmarried cousin who shouldn't be pregnant will be told that she is about to be.

The Christmas story will actually involve one extended family and the lives of cousins – Elizabeth and Mary – and their baby boys, John and Jesus.

Most people think that Gabriel's first message from God – about the birth of a baby boy – was to Mary. It wasn't.

The angel came first, to the husband of Mary's cousin, Elizabeth.

This extended family was about to begin the ride of their lives. And some of the pictures in the family photo album were gonna look different than they could have ever imagined.

Let's back up for a moment and start at the beginning.

Turn to the Gospel by Luke, as Luke the doctor delivers the news in the first chapter of not just one miraculous conception – but two of them.<sup>i</sup>

***Luke chapter 1 and verse 5. In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6. They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.***

Listen, at the very outset we're given the historical context of the Christmas story. This is taking place ***during the days of Herod the King.***

He was also known as Herod the Great – appointed King of Judea by the Roman Senate around 37 years before the birth of Jesus.<sup>ii</sup>

By the time these cousins are born, Herod was already known as a brutal man. He had already ordered the murder of the Jewish high priest simply

because the priest was more popular with the people than he was.

He clung to his title with vicious power – King of the Jews – was his claim and his alone – which is why less than 2 years after these events he will order the execution of every little boy in and around Bethlehem – for one of them had been identified by visiting Persian dignitaries as the King of the Jews (Matthew 2:16).

Herod was already 70 years old when these events took place. Before he died he would have two of his sons murdered simply because he couldn't stand the thought of them taking his place. He imprisoned his third son and then had him executed after his son's attempt to escape from prison failed.

He was petty, insanely jealous and brutal, but he had accomplished one thing especially that had kept his ratings sky high – and immense favor with the people.

He had expanded and lavishly refurbished the Temple.

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian tells us that this temple project involved 10,000 Jewish laborers under the direction of 100 priests.

He wrote that the Temple was refurbished with imported cedar and white marble.

Much of the temple, including massive double front doors, was overlaid with plates of solid gold.

Josephus wrote that the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that people were compelled to look away – as they did if looking directly at the sun. To approaching strangers it appeared from a distance like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white.<sup>iii</sup>

This was all designed, by implication, to fulfill what their last prophet had promised – just before the darkness and the silence of God enveloped the land and people.

Malachi had prophesied that the brilliance of the sun would one day rise upon the nation – ***the sun of righteousness would rise with healing in its wings.*** (*Malachi 4:2*).

The people were waiting for – and hoping for – the sunrise of righteousness – of hope and healing.

But for 400 years now it had only been darkness and despair and confusion and corruption.

No wonder Zacharias says in his response to the birth of his son, John – ***“the sunrise is finally***

***coming to shine upon those who sit in darkness”*** – *Luke chapter 1 at verse 78.*

The darkness is beginning to lift and the sun is beginning to rise.

But not for everyone – Herod the King would only deepen the darkness in his own heart. For him, the sun would never rise.

And he is immediately contrasted with this godly couple Luke introduced to us in *verse 5*.

We're told that a priest named Zacharias was faithfully serving in his division of priests.

We know from history that there were around 10,000 priests serving at this time who lived in and around Palestine. They were divided into 24 groups. Each of the groups was assigned to work for one-week periods, twice a year.<sup>iv</sup>

Luke informs us that the division of Zacharias was under the heading of Abijah.

From these relatively insignificant comments, we're actually able to learn significant things about this old priest.

In fact, we're able to determine that Zacharias wasn't one of the elite members of the priesthood. These priests in his division didn't even live in Jerusalem. They were not among the well connected families of priests. He wasn't among the priestly aristocracy.

Zachariah would have been referred to as an ordinary country priest – one of 8,000 who lived outside the city limits.<sup>v</sup>

We're also told in this verse that he was married to Elizabeth – a direct descendant of Aaron – Israel's first High Priest.

A priest who was married to the daughter of a priest was considered a distinct blessing – but for Zacharias, it was even doubly so, for she had directly descended from Israel's high priestly family.

And her son, John, by the way, would act in many ways as a High priest should act before the people – calling them back to repentance – preparing their hearts to hear the voice of God.

Luke describes this couple with glowing terms – ***verse 6. They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.***

They weren't perfect – we'll see that in a moment, but they were passionate about God and His ministry.

That's why the next phrase is so startling. **Verse 7. But, they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren.**

This is shocking news.

You would have expected the next phrase to read, "And they had 12 children." "And they were exceedingly blessed and prospering, just as the God of the Abrahamic covenant had so promised to His faithful ones."

That's what you'd expect to read.

Not – they were childless.

The religious culture around them would have been unforgiving in their prognosis. Faithful believers could expect to participate in the Abrahamic covenant blessings of prosperity and fertility.

A barren woman in the Old Testament covenant would have assumed she had been somehow abandoned by God's grace for some fault of her own – in fact, everyone around her would conclude the same.

That's why **Rachel finally bears a son she names Joseph and then says in Genesis 30** that God had taken away her reproach.

That's why Elizabeth will say later in **Luke chapter 1, God has taken away my disgrace.**

The Rabbi's were teaching by the time of Christ that several people were unable to enjoy close communion with God – one of them was a Jewish man who's wife was unable to have any children." In fact, barrenness was considered valid grounds for divorce in this culture.<sup>vi</sup>

And so who does God choose to communicate with? Get ready – God is going to turn everything upside down . . . the sun is about to rise. Don't overlook **the last phrase of verse 7** – Dr. Luke knows we need to understand the extent of this miraculous conception of the cousin of Jesus. Luke adds this footnote, **"they were both advanced in years."**

Your translation may read, "They were well stricken in years," which is a good translation simply because the Jews categorized old age with several different phrases.

They believed the commencement of old age began at 65. So a 64 year old wasn't old – but at 65 he *began* to enter old age.

I don't know how that makes you feel – I hope it makes you feel young.

At the age of seventy, he was said to reach "hoary-headed age" – in other words, at 70 a person was now among the grey haired and wise. After the age of 80, they were considered "well stricken in years."<sup>vii</sup>

Zacharias and Elizabeth are in their 80's! Their age spotted hands would never hold their own child.

By the time we're introduced to them, they weren't praying for a child . . . they had stopped praying for a child decades ago.

They were faithful to God and to each other – even though God, for some unknown reason to them, wasn't listening.

They weren't in sin – they weren't hiding rebellion – they weren't out of fellowship – they hadn't abandoned their heritage or their faith.

They were in the middle of God's will – even though God had never given them their greatest wish.

The name, Zacharias means, "God remembers." The name, Elizabeth means, "The promise of my God."

Oh how the enemy must have whispered many times to them, "God remembers His promise? Oh? He evidently doesn't remember His promises on your behalf."

I can't help but stop here for a moment and ask the question – what does it take for you and me to stop serving Him – to stop trusting Him – to believe the lie that God doesn't care about you – that His promises are for everyone else but you.

Like Joseph Parker, the London pastor of the last century who recorded in his journal one day, "Oh God why is it that your hand of blessing is on everyone else but me?"

Ladies and Gentlemen, what I love about the rising sunshine of God's redemptive light is that God chooses an ordinary country priest – someone who really never made much of a contribution to the priesthood – in the eyes of his peers and his neighbors he was now just an old man about to reach an age where he would not be able to make the trip to Jerusalem to perform his duties.

He was married to a descendant of Aaron, but everyone knew that even though this couple was living of life worthy of respect and appreciation, they were obviously under some kind of Divine disapproval and displeasure . . . we don't know what it is, but obviously God can't bless them.

And the remarkable thing to me is that Zacharias didn't resign. Elizabeth didn't say, "Listen, God hasn't paid His fair share . . . why bother . . . we've been living and serving God under this cloud of suspicion for 50 years Zacharias . . . it hasn't been worth it . . . let's hang it up."

Oh man, that's what I would have expected to hear them say by now.

But instead, this priest from the country would gather his clothes and get someone scheduled to look after his homestead and his wife while Elizabeth packed his food and patched his robes and prepared for a week of her own silence as her husband went off to serve a God who seemingly wasn't all that interested in them.

But they stayed at it . . . serving and worshipping God – only by now, at the age of 80, they had stopped praying for certain things – like children and grandchildren.

I couldn't help but think of William Carey the great missionary to India who spent more than 20 years translating the Bible in to several Indian dialects. His biographer recorded how one day his warehouse caught fire and literally burned to the ground. He lost his manuscripts; entire translations of several Bibles in production; the type setting characters used in the presses had literally melted down into clumps of metal. The next day was Sunday and Carey was supposed to preach. He stood and said, "My text for today is *Psalm 46:10, Be still and know that I am God.*"

He went on to say to his congregation that he was confident of two things – first, that God has the right to dispose according to His will as He pleases; and secondly, that our duty as believers is to acquiesce to His will. That didn't mean it was all roses and whistling songs for Carey. In fact, he would write to a family member that this was a heavy blow – he wrote, "Oh, the providence of God is dark."<sup>viii</sup>

There doesn't seem to be any light . . . it's dark . . . there isn't a sunrise in sight. It doesn't make sense . . . you can't figure it out!

Be still and know that He is God.

All of that is about to change – so fast you can't hardly believe it.

Notice *verse 8. Now it happened* – I love that – *it just so happened – that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division* – in other words, he's in Jerusalem for his week of service; *verse 9. He was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and*

*burn incense while the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.*

Listen – here's what's happening.

Hundreds of priests never had the lot land on their name. Thousands of priests over the years had never had the honor of entering the Holy Place – that inner sanctuary just outside the Holy of Holies – to burn incense before God – a symbol of prayer ascending to the very presence of God.

This was the ultimate culmination of his priestly office – he would represent the entire nation in prayer before God.

Here's how it happened. Zacharias would be able to choose two friends – two other priests who would accompany him into the Holy Place. Between the three of them, one of them would remove the remnants of the previous offering of showbread and then reverently back out of the Holy Place.

Another would clean the golden altar of incense and remove the ashes from the previous coals. They would bring hot coals from the outer brazen altar where the animals had been sacrificed and place them on the grid of the golden altar. Then, the second priest would also back out of the Holy Place reverently.<sup>ix</sup>

And, then, at that moment, all the priests and all the people outside the temple would kneel and pray.

Zacharias – all alone – walked over to the golden altar of incense with his liquid frankincense and no doubt with his heart racing and his hands quivering, he poured that costly liquid perfume over the glowing coals.

He was immediately engulfed in billows of this sweet smelling smoke – it was a symbol of the sweetness of prayers ascending to God – implied, by the way, in the gift of frankincense given to Christ as a child by the Magi – you remember.

That was a symbol of the coming sweet intercessory ministry of prayer on our behalf by Jesus Christ our High Priest.

How the heart of Zacharias must have thrilled at the pleasure of this unique ministry on behalf of the people. To a man who never seemed to be noticed – and certainly to a couple who seemed to have been overlooked by God – this was an incredible blessing and confirmation of his life's work.

But it wasn't about to end here.

As the smoke cleared, Zacharias suddenly realized he wasn't alone in there.

Notice *verse 11*. *And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel and fear gripped him.*

That's the biblical way of saying, "He was totally freaked out. He was petrified out of his gourd."

He's in there alone with an angel – and the angel will identify himself later as Gabriel – the angel who had visited the famous prophet Daniel centuries earlier.

And Gabriel said to Zacharias what angels typically have to tell human beings when they first encounter them – *verse 13* – *Don't be afraid, Zacharias.*

"Okay . . . I'm not afraid . . . I'm not afraid . . . I'm not afraid . . . but, what are you doing in here?"

Listen – no word from God for centuries . . . no angel sightings for 400 years . . . suddenly . . . daylight is coming.

Now watch this – And the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John."

Your petition has been heard!

Wait a second. This wasn't Zacharias' petition. He was in their praying for his nation – the coming Messiah – redemption – national holiness.

He was more than 80 years old. He wasn't praying for a son.

- He had prayed that prayer 50 years ago.
- He had offered up that petition to God a million times 40 years ago
- He and Elizabeth had cried together often, praying for a child, 30 years ago.
- And they had finally stopped praying about that.

Zacharias – God heard your prayer – 50 years ago. He knew Elizabeth's feelings of disgrace 40 years ago; He knew all about your longing and your tears 30 years ago.

And when you finally stopped praying about that He knew when you stopped praying too.

Gabriel is delivering this stunning revelation to this old priest –and to every one of us.

Listen, Zacharias, just because God never answered you, doesn't mean He didn't hear you.

He knew you wanted children – and He knows that you now can't have children . . . unless He performs some radical internal surgery that turns the clock back on both of you.

Zacharias, the sun is about to rise . . . you and Elizabeth are a part of the coming daylight of God's redemptive plan.

Your physical inability is now the perfect platform for God's supernatural ability.

Can you imagine these family pictures – 80 year old Elizabeth and Zacharias . . . shopping for baby clothes . . . can you imagine the family portrait? This was not exactly what they had expected in life.

And their son was to be named, John. Which means, "the grace of God."

John would become a daily reminder to them that God's grace had indeed been sufficient to help them persevere through the darkness of their own nighttime when the voice of God had been silent.

And His grace would be sufficient to help them enter the challenging days of parenthood, one day at a time . . . one snapshot at a time . . . one challenge at a time.

Put their three names together and you have this statement: God remembered His promise . . . and His grace was just enough.

Oh, and by the way, no one will be able to miss the fact that the Messiah – and the Messiah's forerunner – these cousins, Jesus and John – are both – in their own unique way . . . nothing less than miraculous conceptions!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/04/2011 by Stephen Davey.

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- i Warren W. Wiersbe, Luke: Be Compassionate (Victor Books, 1988), p. 9
- ii R.C.H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel (Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), p. 37
- iii R. Kent Hughes, Luke, Volume 1 (Crossway Books, 1998), p. 19
- iv Hughes, p. 20
- v Ibid
- vi William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 10
- vii John Phillips, Exploring the Gospel of Luke (Kregel, 2005), p. 61
- viii S. Pearce Carey, William Carey (The Wakeman Trust, 1923), p. 288, 291
- ix Phillips, p. 60