

# The Birth of John the Baptist

Brynmawr Family Church Sermon  
Stuart Wheatman, Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

We will read the account of the birth of John in Lk 1:5-25, 57-80, 3:1-20:

- Lk 1:5-25

'There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS TO THE CHILDREN,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years." And the angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time." And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple. But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless. So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house. Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying, "Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

- Lk 1:57-80

'Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son. When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her. So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias. His mother answered and said, "No; he shall be called John." But they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name." So they made signs to his father--what he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, "His name is John." So they all marveled. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God. Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea. And all those who heard them kept them in their hearts, saying, "What kind of child will this be?" And the hand of the Lord was with him. Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying: "Blessed is 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, Who have been since the world began, That we should be saved from our enemies And from the hand of all who hate us, To perform the mercy promised to our fathers And to remember His holy covenant, The oath which 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 the days of our life. "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace." So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.'

- Lk 3:1-20

'Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and

Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS: 'PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD; MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT. EVERY VALLEY SHALL BE FILLED AND EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL BROUGHT LOW; THE CROOKED PLACES SHALL BE MADE STRAIGHT AND THE ROUGH WAYS SMOOTH; AND ALL FLESH SHALL SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD.'" Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?" He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you." Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages." Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not, John answered, saying to all, "I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire." And with many other exhortations he preached to the people. But Herod the tetrarch, being rebuked by him concerning Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done, also added this, above all, that he shut John up in prison.'

## 1. John ushered in righteousness to the Levitical priesthood

- Zechariah+Elizabeth– both of the tribe of Levi and descendants of Aaron and, therefore, were of the priestly line.
- The priests were descendants of Aaron and should have been 'messengers' (v7b) of the Lord (but had become corrupt):  
 Mal 2:1-2  
 "'And now, O priests, this commandment is for you. If you will not hear, And if you will not take it to heart, To give glory to My name," Says the LORD of hosts, "I will send a curse upon you, And I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have cursed them already, Because you do not take it to heart."  
 Mal 2:7-9  
 "'For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, And people should seek the law from his mouth; For he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But you have departed from the way; You have caused many to stumble at the law. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi," Says the LORD of hosts. "Therefore I also have made you contemptible and base Before all the people, Because you have not kept My ways But have shown partiality in the law."
- God promised instead to send his own 'messenger' to purify the priesthood:  
 Mal 3:1-3  
 'Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," Says the LORD of hosts. "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire And like launderers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, And purge them as gold and silver, That they may offer to the LORD An offering in righteousness.'
- Elijah the prophet would 'turn' the hearts of the father to the children and vice versa. In Hebrew the word 'turn' (shuv) is often associated with repentance:  
 Mal 4 : 4-6  
 'Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, Which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, With the statutes and judgements. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.'
- Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous:  
 Lk 1:6  
 'And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless'.

- John was righteous, living as a person 'set apart' for the Lord, living in the desert and abstaining from drink, living as a Nazarite:  
Lk 1:15  
'For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.'
- Application- the world keeps an especially close eye on leaders within the Church to see if they practise what they preach. Holiness must be lived out within God's Church from the top down.

## 2. John was a man of destiny

- John was descended from Aaron on both sides, therefore was due to become a priest. We too were destined to be priests:  
1 Pet 2:9  
'But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;'
- God's destiny for John's life is seen in the lot falling on his father Zechariah- a once in a lifetime experience. As Christians, the lot has fallen on us- what will we do with it? Zechariah's division was on duty: 24 priests drawn up in David's time (1 Chron 24:7-18). The priests in each division were on duty, twice a year, for a week at a time. Each week for twice a day, morning and evening, they had to take a coal from the altar of sacrifice and place it on the altar of incense and drop incense on it for a sweet smell to God, but in Lev 10, two son's of Aaron performed the ceremony wrongly and died in the tent. So it was concluded that if the priests performed the ceremony incorrectly they would die. Rabbinic teaching expanded on this and said that 'if an angel appeared on the right side of the altar then you had done something wrong, and would die.' (source- Arnold Fruchtenbaum's 'Life of the Messiah from a Jewish Perspective'). This is what happened to Zechariah- no wonder he was scared!
- Many would be outside praying during the hour of incense.  
Lk 1:10  
'And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense.'  
But John was privileged to have the right of access. We have access to God's presence that others don't have. How many non-Christians tonight will pray to God? And yet we have the privilege of access. What will we do with it?
- John was born by a miracle- Elizabeth was barren, but God would turn this around so His destiny for John could be fulfilled. We too have been born (again) by a miracle.
- John's name means-'The Lord has shown favour (or grace).' We, like John have been shown God's favour, God's grace.
- Application- we must realise that we are a people of purpose, privileged to receive God's grace, like John, and also born for 'such a time as this' as was Esther (Esther 4:14). Every Christian has a vital work to do.

## 3. John was empowered by the Holy Spirit.

- John was filled with the Spirit; even in the womb:  
Lk 1:15  
'For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.'
- Elizabeth was also filled with the Holy Spirit:  
Lk 1:41  
'And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.'
- His father was filled at birth and prophesied:

Lk 1:67

'Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying...'

- The ministry of John caused great conviction of sin. This is in line with the ministry of the Holy Spirit:

Jn 16:8

'And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment'

- During outpourings of the Holy Spirit today there is seen great conviction of sin just as in the ministry of John— e.g. Welsh revival, Hebridean revival, Pensacola. Revival is accompanied by mass repentance. John had been anointed by God to preach the message that would result in revival- repentance on mass opening the way for God's grace to the masses.
- We, like John, need to work under the power of God's Holy Spirit if we are to see many come under God's conviction and salvation.

#### **4. The content of John's preaching- repentance & the fear of the Lord; pointing people to Christ.**

- The preaching through John concerning repentance and returning to God's law paved the way for the gospel to bear fruit. God's righteous law highlights how we have fallen and makes us realise our need for God's grace through Christ.

- John came as a herald, a messenger (the Levites should have been God's messengers, as was seen previous) – proclaiming the coming king; Jesus

Lk 1:16

'And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'

- A herald goes before the king's chariot, smoothing the way, repairing the road (valley's lifted, hills made low). Like in Sierra Leone- some earn their living from filling in potholes in the road with mud, until the next time it rains.

Is 40:3-5

'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough places smooth; The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, And all flesh shall see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'

- John was in the spirit and power of Elijah- this was the power to turn crooked hearts back to God. Elijah preached repentance to Israel and lived outside the cultural norms of his day. John looked like Elijah and carried the same message; calling God's people to return to Him:

2 Kings 1:8

'So they answered him, "A hairy man wearing a leather belt around his waist." And he said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite."

Mat 3:4

'Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.'

John straightened the crooked paths. In Hebrew, not being straight is a metaphor for wickedness; and being straight is a metaphor for being righteous. Here are some examples of his preaching righteousness:

Lk 3:7-14

'Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees.

Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?" He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you." Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying,

"And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages."

Lk 3:19-20

'But Herod the tetrarch, being rebuked by him concerning Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done, also added this, above all, that he shut John up in prison.'

- As a herald, John's aim was to point to Jesus. We too must keep the main thing the main thing. We must not depart from the gospel message into simply doing good works- like John, we have a commission to fulfill- Matt 28:18-20. We have become witnesses of the risen Christ. According to the Mosaic law, by the testimony of 2 a matter is established. In the book of Revelation there are 2 witnesses preaching a message of repentance (hence the sackcloth) before the return of Christ:

Rev 11:3

'And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth.'

Just as Jesus had a forerunner before His first coming, so also He raises up His Church to herald His return. The 2 witnesses are described like the ministries of Moses & Elijah. Both had ministries of sign and wonders. God's end-time Church is to be a nation in the spirit of John the Baptist, Elijah and Moses; explaining the judgements of God, working signs and wonders; calling people to repentance and leading people to Christ.

## **5. The results of his life and ministry- the fear of the Lord.**

- His father, Zechariah's being struck mute & then set free when John was circumcised was a sign which caused the fear of God. I had a fit as a child and afterwards could not speak for an evening, (even though I could understand all that was said to me) and it was frightening. With Zechariah, it came as a result of a godly encounter and the result was the fear of the Lord:

Lk1:65

'Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea.'

- As we move in our gifts, the same will happen:

1Cor 14:24-25

'But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.'

- When the Church is revived, the result is whole communities knowing the fear of the Lord. At the time of the early Church, outsiders esteemed them; yet were fearful to join them because they were aware that God was with them:

Acts 5:13

'Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly.'

- Ananias & Sapphira.

Also the supernatural judgements of God against blatant sin caused an awe of God in the Church:

Acts 5:1-11

'But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him. Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much." Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her

last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband. So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.'

- The ministry of the Holy Spirit, as seen in the life of Jesus, causes the awesome fear of the Lord:

Is 11:2-3

'The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, The Spirit of counsel and might, The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD. His delight is in the fear of the LORD, And He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, Nor decide by the hearing of His ears;'

- Application- we need to move in the supernatural power of God and become, as John was, a sign and a wonder to our communities if we are to see the fear of the Lord return to people in our generation. When people see the demonstration of the Spirit's power, as the people did under the ministry of Elijah, they will again hold our great God in awe.

### **Conclusion**

We, as God's people, are to prepare the way for the return of the Lord, as John did in His first coming. We are to do this by preaching the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. As we move in God's supernatural power we will see the return of the fear of the Lord, opening the way for people to receive God's grace in the gospel.

Song- These are the days of Elijah