

Exegetical Notes, Luke 1:5-17
“The Great Story of the Savior’s Birth
Part 1: The Plan of God”

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Luke 1:5-17

Verse 5

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.

- Herod the Great ruled Judea from 37BC to 4 AD. This is the king mentioned here. Therefore these events happened sometime during his reign.
- The story concerns events that happened to a Jewish priest whose name was Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. Zechariah was of the priestly family or order of Abijah. The priests were divided into 24 divisions. Abijah was one of the historic leaders of one of these divisions. All priests in Israel were descended from Aaron, the brother of Moses. In this case Zechariah had married a woman who was also descended from Aaron.

Verse 6

Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.

- The second phrase informs the first. Both Elizabeth and Zechariah kept all of the commandments of the Jewish law blamelessly, without fault. Therefore, they had found favor with God.

Verse 7

But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

- Elizabeth and Zechariah were old, beyond the years of childbearing.

- But they had no children. Normally, regardless of the actual facts, the fault would have been laid at Elizabeth's feet. In those days, women were always considered to be the problem in such cases. However, in this case, the facts support the blame. They did not have children because Elizabeth was barren.
- In those days, the lack of children would have been thought of as God's curse on the couple. The common thought was that God had cursed such a couple because He had not blessed them with children. So despite the fact that God looked on this couple with pleasure (see verse 6), others would have considered that God was punishing them because they did not have kids.

Verse 8-9

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

- Each division worked in the temple only two weeks of the year. These events happened during that time for the division of Abijah.
- Zechariah was chosen, by the casting of dice, to burn incense on the altar directly before the Most Holy Place in the temple. This was a great honor taken as indicating God's special favor on the person so picked. It was an honor that would normally fall to any particular priest rarely and might never come.

Verse 10

And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

- Only the chosen priest could enter this place. So, as the worshipers waited for him outside, Zechariah entered the prescribed spot to do his task alone.

Verse 11-12

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

- No one was supposed to be in this part of the temple except Zechariah. So naturally, he was startled when he realized that someone else was there.

- Though the angel is not described, his appearance was such as to be other than human. Zechariah knew that he was an angel. This realization filled him with fear.

Verse 13

But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.”

- The angel told Zechariah that the apparent curse of God would be lifted, for his prayer for a child had been heard and Elizabeth was pregnant with his child. Though it would have been usual for the child to be named after his father or some other member of the family, this child was to be named John. The name means, “the Lord of gracious.”

Verse 14-15

“He will be a joy and a delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.”

- This child will be special to his parent and to other people as well.
- He will have a special place in God’s sight and will be filled with the Holy Spirit so that he can do what it is that God calls him to do.
- He is to abstain from fermented beverages.

Verse 16-17

“Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous -- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

- John would perform a very special function in that he would prepare the people of God to receive God’s Messiah. See Malachi 4:5-6.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *The Great Story of the Savior’s Birth – Part 1: The Plan of God*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)