

## The Witness to the Light

Luke 1:57-80

The great 18th century missionary to India, William Carey, who is known as the father of modern missions, said, "I'm not afraid of failure. I'm afraid of succeeding at things that don't matter." Men and women like William Carey accomplished great things for God because hearing "Well done" from the only lips that matter is what mattered most to them.

John the Baptist was such a man. In fact, Jesus said from His own lips that of all the men born of women there was none greater than John the Baptist. That should get our attention. What was it about John that he would receive such a commendation from the Lord?

As we will see, John was great in the only eyes that matter because he humbly lived to fulfill the mission He was born for, namely to prepare the way for Jesus. Concerning John the Baptist, the gospel of John records: *"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world."* John 1:6-9

Recently I read that every December 13 families in a neighborhood in St. Petersburg Florida join forces to set up a dazzling display of 300,000 Christmas lights. People drive for miles and wait in line for hours to see the flashing, colorful lights and hear the music that is programmed to go with it. The sound-and-light display is so elaborate that it requires a network of 64 computers to keep everything synchronized.

But as dazzling as those holiday lights appear, they don't compare to the Light that makes Christmas a holiday for many—a single Light so bright that it illuminates the whole world with truth, peace, and love. "This Light—Jesus—is everything that the world is longing and looking for (Isa. 9:2,6-7). And He has told His followers to display His light so that others will see and glorify God (Matt. 5:16)." ODB

John the Baptist was great because he prepared the way for the light of the world. He was not “the light” but he was “a light” that led people to Jesus. The apostle John records that Jesus also said this about John the Baptist: *“He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light”* John 5:35

The light of John that people rejoiced in was the glory of Jesus revealed through his Holy Spirit illuminated ministry. And if you’ve received the revelation of Jesus who is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, like John, you are also “a light” and a representative of God’s upside down kingdom on earth.

How many hours did those families, who set up 300.000 lights, spend in preparation for the holiday season? “Imagine if Christians prepared as hard at shining and synchronizing the light of God’s love as the families of that neighborhood prepare when they illuminate their street with Christmas lights. Perhaps then the people still living in darkness would make an effort to see this great Light. When Christians work together to display God’s love, the gospel will shine more brightly and attract more people to Jesus—the Light of the world.” ODB

**Main idea:** Twice born believers are regenerated by the Spirit to bear witness to the light of life.

This morning we are going to look at what Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father, said about John after Elizabeth gave birth to him. From his prophetic words, we will consider some key factors that enabled John to succeed at what matters most, namely to be a witness to the light of the world.

## 1. **John had a miraculous birth**

To begin with, John had a miraculous birth. Concerning the birth of John we read beginning in verse 57:

*“Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.  
58 And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown*

*great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. 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." Luke 1:57-64*

As we learned in a previous message, John's birth was miraculous because before he was born, his parents were advanced in years and his mom Elizabeth was passed the age of childbearing. Because of this, when it came time for her to give birth, we read in verse 58 that her neighbors and relatives, knowing that God had shown her great mercy, rejoiced with her. And when according to Jewish custom it came time for the child to be circumcised, those who were gathered together to celebrate, encouraged Elizabeth to name him after his father.

But if you recall, the angel Gabriel already revealed to her husband Zechariah that in answer to their prayers his wife would give birth to a son who was to be named John, which means Yahweh is gracious. Therefore Elizabeth, answering for her husband who was mute at the time, said, *"No; he shall be called John."* And after the family and friends questioned what they assumed was an unusual choice for a name, they turned to Zechariah with hand signs asking what he wanted his son to be called.

If I were Zechariah, I would have first wrote down, "What's with the hands signs? I'm mute but I'm not deaf." But Zechariah, being much more patient than I, wrote emphatically, "His name is John."

Remember the last time Zechariah questioned the angel Gabriel in unbelief about his wife miraculously giving birth, he lost his ability to speak. And here we see that his ability to speak miraculously returns not only after the fulfillment of John's miraculous birth, but after

Zechariah fulfills everything he was told to do, namely to call his son John.

Moreover, when he does speak again for the first time in over 9 months, he praises God for not just the birth of his son, but for the coming of the messiah who John would prepare the way for. John was great because he was miraculously born to do more than just bring joy to his parents, he would pave the way for the first coming of Jesus. He would become a burning and shining light that pointed to the light of the world.

Notice that as Zechariah opens his mouth for the first time in over nine months and blesses God, Luke continues: *“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.”* Luke 1:65-66

Due to the miraculous works connected to John’s birth, and the prophetic words that the formerly mute Zechariah spoke, the people present knew that his son was destined for greatness. As a result, the hopeful news about John’s miraculous birth and prophetic destiny spread, and all who heard the good news treasured it in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?”

Their question was not one of doubt but of wonder and amazement. And because their question was one of wonder, Luke add this commentary, *“For the hand of the Lord was with him.”* John was destined for greatest because God’s hand was not only upon his birth, God’s hand would be upon his life. John would not only be filled with the Spirit in the womb of his mother, but also in the work of ministry as he fulfilled God’s mission for his life.

I must remind us here that when the angel Gabriel revealed to Zechariah that his wife would miraculously give birth, he did so while Zechariah faithfully fulfilled his priestly duty in the temple in the offering of incense. Moreover, the angel revealed that the miraculous birth of his son was an answer to their prayers.

In a previous message, we learned that at the moment that Gabriel revealed that Zechariah would have a son, he probably was praying not for a son but for the redemption of Israel. And when he opens his mouth again nine months later, his praise reveals that God did far more than just answer his prayers for a child, he also revealed the role his child would play in the unfolding of God's redemptive plan. Commentator David Garland put it this way, [Zechariah and Elizabeth's] personal prayers have meshed with God's plan in the drama of redemption to restore Israel to God."

O how many of us want God's hand, His favor, and His power to be evident in our children's lives? As John's miracle birth reveals, God works in answer to prayer. So whether our children are young or old, let's pray that God's hand would be upon them trusting, as Zechariah learned the hard way, that God's timing is perfect. And let's not just pray for God's hand to be upon them so that they are successful in this world, let's pray for God's hand to be upon them so that they are successful at the things that matter most.

And let me add that you may not have been miraculously born of parents that were advanced in years, but if you have received Jesus by faith as Savior and Lord, you have been miraculously born again from above. And the same Holy Spirit that Luke references repeatedly in chapter one, the same Holy Spirit that loosed the tongue of Zechariah at the birth of his son to prophesy, the same Holy Spirit that filled John the Baptist in His mother's womb and throughout his remarkable life, the same Holy Spirit that filled Elizabeth and enabled her to speak prophetically over Mary when she visited with her, and the same Holy Spirit that conceived the Son of God in the virgin's womb, if you have been born from above, that same Holy Spirit dwells in you so that, like John, you can be a burning and shining lamp in this dark world.

## **2. John lived a missional life**

Secondly, John was a great man not only because of His miraculous birth but because John lived a missional life. Notice that when

Zechariah's tongue was loosed and he began to praise and prophesy before the people, his words are centered on the light of life and the role John would play in bearing witness to the light. Luke continues beginning in verse 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 74 that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” Luke 1:67-75*

It's important to observe here that the first part of Zechariah's Spirit filled prophecy is focused on how Jesus will deliver his people from political oppression and physical domination by their enemies. When the virgin Mary conceived Jesus, God had indeed visited His people and the unfolding of His redemptive plan was being fulfilled. But as we know on the other side of the cross, God's saving plan involved much more than political salvation for Israel, which again was Zechariah's focus in the first part of his prophecy.

As Zechariah proclaimed, God indeed raised up a horn of salvation, which speaks of His strength and power, in the house of David. The kingdom of David will be established in Jesus and will continue forever, as Gabriel revealed in His earlier prophecy to Zechariah. But this salvation would extend beyond the physical descendants of David from whom Jesus was born, to the spiritual salvation of Jews and Gentiles.

Zechariah also goes on to reveal that the prophecies that were unfolding in his time was the fulfillment of God's covenant to Abraham whose descendants would be like the stars in multitude, and like the

sand on the seashore. God said to Abraham that He would bless those who blessed him and curse those who cursed him.

So there would come a day, as Zechariah also prophesied, that Israel would be free to serve and worship God without any hinderance or persecution. More than the physical salvation of Israel, this is the ultimate aim of salvation, namely unhindered worship of God. Exodus 7:16

God also revealed to Abraham, which Zechariah's prophesy doesn't indicate, that all the nations of the world will be blessed through the seed of Abraham which is also fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And it's fulfilled in Jesus not by Him coming first to save His people from political domination, but by Him coming first to save His people from their sin. Matthew 1:20-21

The redemption that many in Israel looked for was political freedom from their enemies. But the greatest enemy then and now that Jesus came to set us free from is the corruption of sin that dwells in every man. Jesus accomplished this not by first dealing with the political corruption, but by dealing with the sin corruption in every man.

And in His upside down kingdom He did so not by killing His enemies, but by loving His enemies, He did so not by first reigning on an earthly throne, but by first laying His life down—by tasting death for every man so that all who believe might receive forgiveness of sin.

So although Zechariah in the beginning of his prophecy focuses on political freedom, which will come when Jesus returns the second time, as he closes His prophecy, He moves to what Jesus came to deal with in His first coming and the role of John in preparing the way:

*“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.” Luke 1:76-79*

John was great because although his notable miraculous birth gave him a reputation that no doubt helped to gain him influence, he used that influence to point people to the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John was great because He spoke the word of God whether it was popular or not which would eventually lead to his imprisonment and martyrdom. He wasn't like your so called prophets today who claim to be speaking for God but are lining their pockets by saying things like I heard one say recently, "God told me to tell 21 people to give 1000."

According to the prophecy of Zechariah, John would be great because he was a prophet of God not of man. He wasn't the light but he was a light by giving knowledge of salvation for the forgiveness of sins. "He was unique among the prophets because he was the forerunner. He will soften the ground. He will till the soil of Israel's heart. John will be a giant index finger pointing the way to God's salvation from sin."  
Thabiti Anyabwile

And pay close attention to one commentator's observation:  
"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" (John 3:30). The prophet of salvation never replaces the bringer of salvation." Thabiti Anyabwile

Again, success to John is hearing "Well done" from the only lips that matter. Failure to him would be succeeding at things that don't finally matter at all. In God's upside down kingdom, men and women of God don't live to make much of themselves but to make much of Jesus which is where their fullest joy is found. What are you living for? As I read recently, "Life isn't about creating yourself; it's about discovering who God has created you to be."

And we can discover who God created us to be—we can be forgiven of the sin that keeps us in the dark, because as Zechariah concluded in His amazing prophecy: *"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.” Luke 1:76-79*

Beloved, the first coming of Jesus was the most beautiful, life giving, and hope producing sunrise this world has ever known. Jesus came the first time to give light and hope to those who sit imprisoned in the darkness and destruction of sin. And after He accomplished His work of redemption on the cross, rose again, and before He ascended into heaven, He commissioned His disciples to go into all the world in the power of His Spirit to continue to shine His light so that the darkness of sin in the hearts of people would be exposed and expelled. And when the light of Jesus comes into the hearts of men and women and they bow before it in repentance and faith, the light of His presence remains as Zechariah prophesied, *to guide our feet into the way of peace*, a peace that this world can never give.

As I've said many times, peace is not the absence of trouble, it's the presence of Jesus. And when we know the peace of Christ's life giving and light guiding presence, we can be a light in the darkness and hopelessness of this world.

### **3. John was a man of God**

Lastly, John was a great man, a man who was a burning and shining lamp, because in addition to his miracle birth and missional life, He was a man of God. After the prophecy of Zechariah, Luke adds this commentary to his historical narrative:

*“And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.” Luke 1:80*

The phrase “man of God” was a common biblical designation of respect applied to prophets and respected godly leaders. It's found 78 times in the Bible referring to men like Moses, Elijah, Samuel and Timothy. This designation was given not because they went around calling themselves men of God. Rather it was a designation that was spoken out of respect by others because of the godly character and

spiritual power evident in their lives. Men of God are God called men sent by Him to fulfill His purpose with His notable grace and power.

Notice again that Luke highlights that John grew not just physically but he became strong in spirit. That is, he became a man of spiritual vitality and fortitude. And Luke mentions right after noting that he was strong in spirit that he also was in the wilderness until the start of his public ministry.

The wilderness is where prophets are made. According to other historical writings, some scholars suggest that John could have been part of a group of scribes who were set apart in the wilderness and charged with preserving scriptures. That may be a possibility but we don't know that for sure.

What we do know is that the wilderness was a place where God prepared His people for what He was calling them to. Ed Davidson says the wilderness in the life of the people of God "is a place of **preparation**, a place of **separation** and a place of **revelation** from God."

Moses spent 40 years in the back side of the desert where he met God before starting his earthly ministry. David was a shepherd in the wilderness before God called him to be king. And Jesus spent forty days fasting and being tested in the wilderness before the start of His public ministry.

The point is that men and women of God are a light for God is the darkness because who they are in their public life is who they are in their private lives. Men and women of God shine brightly for God because the hand of God is upon their lives. And the hand of God is upon them—the presence and power of God is evident in their lives because they spend time alone with Him. They don't just talk to people on behalf of God, they talk to God on behalf of the people. They have influence with people in their public lives because they are influenced much by God in their private lives.

## Conclusion

It's been said, the problem in our world is not the pervasiveness of the darkness, but the absence of the light. Jesus not only said of John that among men there was none greater than John, He said: "*He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light*" John 5:35

Are you bringing Christ's light to your space in this world, to your work place, to your home? Do we bring Christ's hope, joy and love into our circles of influence? Do we bring gladness or gloom into a room? It's true that not everyone will appreciate our witness for Christ, but may it never be because we are misrepresenting Him.

Let us who have been miraculously born from above seek to live missional lives, lives that are not afraid of failure but at succeeding at things that don't matter. As the world gets darker, may we seek daily to be guided by the light and glory of Jesus so that we might be men and women of God who shine brightly for Him, who prepare the way for people sitting in darkness to come to Jesus and be forever free.