

The Birth of History's Greatest Man

Luke 1:57–80 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION: As a student of history I have often marveled at the titles given to great men. Some were called, “great”, Alexander the Great, Herod the Great... others were called, “terrible” Ivan the Terrible. It seems, what makes one man great and another man terrible is simply the author of the History book. History belongs to the winners so often.

Yet, by any estimation if Jesus of Nazareth calls you great, you my friend, are great. Jesus Himself would be in a separate category, of course - the God man. But of ordinary men born of woman, who was the greatest? Well, there was one man on whom Jesus bestowed that honor.

Matthew 11:11 (ESV)

[“¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist...”](#)

He is called John the Baptist, or John the Baptizer. Perhaps we should call him, “John the Great”, in the tradition of the great leaders of the world. What is the secret of John’s greatness?

Imagine 30 years from now, of whom will it be said, “Of all those graduates from Fernandina and Yulee, home schools and private schools - none has arisen greater than _____”. Who will it be?

What is the secret of Greatness in the eyes of God? Well one of the secrets lies in our text today. And it is not taken from John himself - he is only 8 days old. This secret is found in the words of a loving father.

CONTEXT: Remember when the Angel Gabriel met Zechariah the Priest in the Holy place he told him that he and Elizabeth were to give birth to a son in their old age. Zechariah gave evidence that he either didn’t believe in the promise of God or he didn’t believe the power of God to bring a child to them this late in life. Either way - **Gabriel struck Zechariah mute, and as we see in today’s text - he was also deaf.**

TYPE - Zechariah in some ways is a type or shadow of the nation Israel. God’s Word came to them, yet they did not believe - “He came unto His own and His own received Him not”. Thus for the last 2,100 years they have had a veil over their hearts - neither hearing from God nor speaking for God because of their rejection of the Son of God.

TEXT: Luke 1:57–80 (ESV)

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.

You can tell much about a people by what they celebrate. This community celebrated the birth of a child!

There is something intrinsic in humanity that leads us to celebrate birth. So much hope, so many possibilities! Who knows what this child's future holds? Perhaps a Doctor who will bring healing to the sick, perhaps an Artist that will bring inspiration to the world. Perhaps Father to children of his own. Whatever it is - the birth of a child is worthy of celebration.

- Baby Showers at churches cannot be overdone. As a matter of fact, I think some of you ladies should take it upon yourselves to be the minister of baby showers. Well what if she's already had one? Have two! What gets celebrated gets repeated.
- I think the waiting rooms in Labor and Delivery halls of N. FL. ought to have to be expanded. There is nothing wrong in this world, that the birth of a child can't fix.

59 And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child.

Now remember - circumcision was the **covenant sign** given to Abraham to mark his faith covenant with God. Every male offspring was to receive the sign of the covenant. Interestingly, it was on the **reproductive organ** of the male. In other words - this was a reminder both to man and woman that they were to marry and reproduce within the covenant community, equally yoked together as Paul would later say.

Circumcision was also the ceremonial time for giving the child his name.

59b. And they (that is, the friends) would have called him Zechariah after his father, 60 but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John."

In the Jewish community it was the tradition that the son was named after his father. So here, it is assumed his name would be **Zach Junior** - which I agree would be a wonderful name. But Elizabeth objected - "No; he shall be called John."

61 And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name."

Elizabeth, this is not in keeping with tradition. This is not what NORMAL people do. Well Elizabeth may have said, **"this will be no normal child"**.

The friends appealed to Zechariah - knowing that the final call was his to make.

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.

Zechariah hadn't overheard the conversation. He wasn't the type to be henpecked by his wife. No, the two of them were working in Tandem - intent on believing and obeying the Word of God sent by the Angel Gabriel - *Zechariah had certainly learned his lesson.*

⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.

Now remember, I told you earlier that Zachariah was a type of the nation Israel. Our Lord prophesied over Jerusalem before His death - **Matthew 23:39 (ESV)** ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again, **until you say**, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

There is coming a day - when suddenly and dramatically, the spiritual ears of ethnic Israel will be opened. They will have eyes to see the reality of their Messiah in the person of Jesus Christ. And their mouths will be loosed to make that confession - that Jesus is Lord! Those are the 144,000 mentioned in Revelation - an army of Jewish Evangelists circling the globe proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Zechariah is a type and shadow of that coming reality.

⁶⁵ 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.

From that point Zechariah began to prophesy. His prophecy has been traditionally called, "**the Benedictus**" throughout church history. Benedictus means the invocation - it is a ceremonial blessing to commemorate the beginning of a special event.

We will look carefully at the substance of Zechariah's blessing. But notice for a moment the power that his words will have over the destiny of his son. The power of life and death are in the tongue.

IMPORTANT POINT - If the words of any common man contain the power of the sword, the words of a FATHER to a CHILD are nuclear in their power.

They may either provide a clean source of energy that will propel that child into the future, or they may level any potential hope to the ground. So often, the life of the child is set on course by the words of the parent. Let's ease drop on the words of the Father of the greatest man who ever lived....

First he gives...

1. He Speaks over John Concerning Christ

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

Two things in particular are said by Zechariah concerning Christ - namely that the Messiah would bring a *Threatening Power and a Tender Promise*.

a. A Threatening Power

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,

Now a HORN is like that of an animal. The horn was the animals offensive weapon, his most dangerous member.

David writes in Psalm 92:9–10 (ESV)

⁹ ... O Lord, ..enemies shall perish; all evildoers shall be scattered. (HOW) ¹⁰ ..**you have exalted my horn like that of the wild ox;**

Again we see it in Micah 4:13 (ESV)

¹³ Arise and thresh, O daughter of Zion, for **I will make your horn iron**, and I will make your hoofs bronze; you shall beat in pieces many peoples...

2 Samuel 22:3 (ESV)

³ my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and **the horn of my salvation**, my stronghold and my refuge, my savior; you save me from violence.

ILLUSTRATION: As a teenager I worked from time to time on a dairy farm. There were many cows and one bull. That bull had large horns. I can't remember anything in all of life more terrifying than seeing that bull get angry and begin to smash those horns against the tattered wooden fence that stood between me and him. For years I had nightmares about that bull suddenly getting free and coming after me.



Well Zechariah says that MESSIAH will be a **HORN of salvation**. When he is pointed against you - **he is a terrible threat**.

Have you ever thought of Jesus like that? You see, before he can be a Savior to you, He must first be recognized as a THREAT.

Matthew 10:28 (ESV)

28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Think of it - FROM WHAT DO YOU NEED TO BE SAVED? Someone answers, "saved from sin", yes in one sense, but in reality it is the eternal consequences of your sin. What are they? Eternal Death in the the lake of fire, what scripture calls, "hell". What is hell? It is the **wrath of God** emanating against sinners forever and ever. Hell is what happens when sinful people are thrust into the presence of God.

ILLUSTRATION: Someone says, "well my God would never through someone into Hell". Well, if that is a case you don't have much of a god. You mean to tell me that injustice will prevail? Murderers and cheaters will get away with their crimes? No, **every sin must be paid for - either by the sinner or by the Savior.**

Zechariah speaks of a threatening horn....but also...

b. A Tender Promise

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.

There were over 2100 years between the promise of God to Abraham to bless the entire world through his SEED (offspring) and the birth of Jesus Christ. But God is not slack concerning His promise... but He is patient.

Every single promise of God will be fulfilled. Mark it down. **Write it down with a Sharpie** - if God said it, you can count on it.

And friend, just as it took 2100 years from the promise of God to come to Israel. It has been 2100 years since the promise of our Lord to return - but Every single promise of God will be fulfilled. Mark it down.

NOTICE, that among the first words Zechariah would speak over John, we see words about Jesus. Father's, you have had opportunities to speak over your sons and daughters, perhaps at birth, perhaps at some formal school function, perhaps at their wedding. When you speak - speak Jesus over them.

Well there was a prophecy concerning Christ...there was also...

2. He Speaks over John Concerning John's Call

Two things in particular, first he would be...

a. A Faithful Prophet

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

Now, Zechariah had an advantage over most of us - God sent an Angel to tell him what John would be. You may not know your child's career from birth. You may not know if they will be a CEO or a Chef, but you KNOW they are called to be a faithful one, whatever they may be.

John would be the first Prophet, in the OT sense of the word, since Malachi. Others would prophecy - Zechariah had just done that, in a sense Mary had done that. But they were not PROPHETS in the same sense as the OT prophets - John would be.

The final word from the final prophet in the OT was the Prophet Malachi. The last thing he said was found in **Malachi 4:5 (ESV)** ⁵ "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.

John would be that Elijah that was to come. Zechariah also makes reference to a prophecy of Isaiah.

Isaiah 40:3–5 (ESV)

³ ***A voice cries: "In the wilderness*** prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

John would be that voice in the wilderness. He would prepare the hearts of Israel to receive it's Messiah. *Consider for a moment* that **God stacked the deck in favor of Israel.** Every promise kept, every favor given - John would lead in a great spiritual renewal preceding the coming of Christ.

Not only a Faithful Prophet, but also...

b. A Fruitful Evangelist

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."

The thing that would set John apart from other preachers in scripture was his use of Baptism. About 100 years before John, the Jews began to institute the use of the **Mikva**. This was a baptism pool, fed by natural spring water. It had a number of uses, but one of the primary uses was with gentile proselytes.

In other words, when non Jewish people wanted to enter into the Covenant community of God's people, they were to step into a Mikva waist deep, and they

would kneel down into the water and then stand and walk out. This would symbolize the spiritual cleansing that the Good God of Israel provides.

Some believe we see a prototype of this in n **2 Kings 5:1-19**, when Naaman was sent to Elisha, to be healed. Instead of Elisha coming to the door to greet Naaman, he sent a messenger to him saying, “Go and wash in the Jordan River seven times, and your flesh will be restored to you and you shall be clean.” Naaman’s obedience would symbolize his faith in the God of Israel and his belief that Israel’s God would bring healing and restoration.

John was an innovator. He would take that ancient practice and apply it to the JEWS -he was calling ISRAEL to be baptized. These were the physical descendants of Abraham, these men were circumcised, some were even Pharisees.

What John was doing was similar to what an **Evangelist like Billy Graham** would do. In a much smaller way what each and every one of us are supposed to do, in calling people to repent and believe in Christ.

⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION: There are things I have done as a Father that I regret. Times I lost my temper, at times I disciplined too soon, or not soon enough. At times, I was too strict and should have given more liberties, at times I gave too much liberty.

Nevertheless, one practice that I had during the childhood years of our three kids was that each night I would go into their rooms and pray over them. I would place the palm of my hand on their head and speak a blessing.

I will never forget one night in particular. Carly was maybe 8 or 9 years old. It had been a rough day. She had gotten into trouble and was being sent to bed early. Frankly, I didn’t want to pray a blessing over her that night, and I wasn’t sure she wanted to receive it. As I approached her door I could hear her whimpering in the darkness. I walked into her room as she lay curled up in her bed and I began to whisper a prayer. She reached out, took my hand and pulled it onto her head. I could feel her tears on her face and I gently wiped them away.

Our kids probably don’t remember what we said on those occasions - but God does. John didn’t comprehend what Zechariah said, he was 8 days old. But there is something about speaking a blessing over your child - it is as if all of HEAVEN conspires to bring it to fruition.