

When Did Christmas Begin?

Luke 1:1-17

1:1-3 “Many have undertaken to compile a *narrative about the events* that have been fulfilled among us, just as the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed them down to us. It also seemed good to me, since I have carefully investigated everything *from the very first, to write to you in orderly sequence...*”

The Christmas Story Starts with the Conception and Birth of John the Baptist.

Mark began his gospel telling us when Christmas began:

Mark 1:1-2 “*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: Look, I am sending My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way.*”

What the Births of John and Jesus Had in Common

- The same angel, Gabriel, appeared to Zechariah and Mary.
- Both were troubled by the angelic visit.
- Both were told not to be afraid.
- Both were told of the future birth of a son.
- Both births were associated with the work of the Holy Spirit.
- In both passages the angel gave the name for the son.
- In both the angel stated that the son would be great and part of God’s plan.

—New American Commentary

Differences Between John and Jesus

- John’s mother was older and had been unable to have children; Jesus was born to a virgin.
- The difference in their conceptions and births was between the impossible and the *absolutely impossible*.
- John’s name meant, “God is gracious”; Jesus’ name means, “Savior.”
- John came to prepare for the Lord; Jesus IS the Lord.

Insights from Zechariah and Elizabeth

Zechariah and Elizabeth were not a well-known power-couple. He was a priest, but not the high priest; just a guy in the rank and file of priests. Then, by divine appointment, Zechariah is chosen by lot to burn incense in the Holy Place. And, in the experiences of Zechariah and Elizabeth, we see an example of the kind of couple God uses.

1. The Couple God Uses Exhibits Christian Character

Vs. 5-6 “In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest of Abijah’s division named Zechariah. His wife was from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. *Both were righteous in God’s sight, living without blame according to all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.*”

You may be thinking, “Well, that isn’t the story of my life. For me, it is too late.” Oh, but listen to the promise in 2 Timothy 2:21:

“So if anyone purifies himself from anything dishonorable, he will be a special instrument, set apart, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.”

2. The Couple God Uses Endures Delays & Setbacks

God’s best people are not immune to this. In the experience of Zechariah and Elizabeth, it was a long and painful series of setbacks.

Vs. 7 “But they had no children because Elizabeth could not conceive, and both of them were well along in years.”

A great Spanish saint prayed for his people, “May God deny you peace and give you glory.”

Someone in more recent times has said, “Jesus Christ came not to make life easy but to make men great.”

Answers to prayer which are delayed... are not prayers unheard.

Vs. 13 “But the angel said to him: Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because *your prayer has been heard.*”

3. The Couple God Uses Demonstrate God's Plan at Work

Zechariah and Elizabeth are living a faithful, but rather ordinary life. But then, God intervenes.

Vs. 11-12 "An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and overcome with fear."

Zechariah receives good news in Verses 13-17:

- Elizabeth will bear you a son.
- There will be joy and delight for you.
- Many will rejoice at his birth.
- He will be great in the sight of the Lord.
- and will never drink wine or beer.
- He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb.

Vs. 8-9 "When his division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, it happened that he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense."

One of the best secrets to experiencing God's best: Just be where you are supposed to be, doing what you are supposed to do. Good things happen when you are at the right place at the right time.

Somebody Has to Be the First

They went ahead of Mary and Joseph in having a baby with supernatural aid. Elizabeth would be able to encourage Mary, whom the Lord would soon send to Elizabeth. Elizabeth would be the only person on earth who could relate to Mary in a supernaturally aided conception. Elizabeth would believe her.

Some don't want to be the first. They don't want to help start the new Sunday School class; they want to stay in their comfortable established class. They don't want to help start a new ministry; they want to soak in the blessings from an established ministry. The people God uses most are willing to go first.

4. The Couple God Uses Experience God's Correction

Zechariah and Elizabeth had experienced nothing but disappointment in the business of having children. His life experience had taught him not to get his hopes up. But sometimes we learn the wrong lesson from our life experiences. So, Zechariah expresses his doubt:

Vs. 18-20 “How can I know this?’ Zechariah asked the angel. ‘For I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years.’

And God's correction comes:

“The angel answered him, ‘I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and tell you this good news. Now listen! You will become silent and unable to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time.’”

5. The Couple God Uses Exalts God in Spirit-filled Worship

The angel sends Mary to Elizabeth for encouragement and support. The moment she enters the house a praise service erupts.

Vs. 41-42 “When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped inside her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she exclaimed with a loud cry: ‘You are the most blessed of women, and your child will be blessed!’”

Mary would return home. Elizabeth would give birth. And Zechariah would have to stand his ground that the child would be named John. And the moment he does so, the Lord restores his ability to speak.

Vs. 67-68 “Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: ‘Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has visited and provided redemption for His people.’”

6. The Couple God Uses Encourage Those Behind Them

Mary is told by the angel, Gabriel:

Vs. 36-37 “And consider your relative Elizabeth—even she has conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Mary is sent to Elizabeth for encouragement and to brace her up for what is ahead. And what confirmation Mary will receive!

Vs. 41-42 “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped inside her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she exclaimed with a loud cry: ‘You are the most blessed of women, and your child will be blessed!’”

Vs. 56 “And Mary stayed with her about three months; then she returned to her home.”

Consider now whom you have behind you. Who are you encouraging? How are you bracing them up for what is ahead?

7. The Couple God Uses Equip a New Generation to Serve God

John the Baptist will become a “high impact” person. In verses 13-17, the angel tells Zechariah:

- He will be great in the sight of the Lord
- He will never drink wine or beer.
- He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother’s womb.
- He will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God.
- He will go before the Messiah in the spirit and power of Elijah.
- He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children.
- He will turn the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous.
- He will make ready for the Lord a prepared people.

Such people do not appear out of thin air. They generally come from homes which nurture them in the Lord, train their hands for spiritual warfare, and help them become the best person they can be.

The Couple God Uses:

1. Exhibit Christian Character vs. 5-6
2. Endure Delays and Setbacks vs. 7
3. Exemplify God's Good Plan at Work 11-17
4. Experience God's Correction 18-20
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