

The Birth of John

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 0 0] We're going to read again. We started there reading the story of John's birth as it was announced to his father Zechariah who is a priest in the temple. We've been doing, if you're visiting with us today, if you're here for the baptism or if you're just visiting with us in the city, we've been looking for the last number of months in our morning service at the great old stories of the Old Testament, the children's Bible stories and we've been preaching on them and we're coming up now to the last of our two sermons and the first from the New Testament. We're looking at the birth of John today and then next Sunday morning we'll look at the birth of Jesus. That just puts in context where we are and where we've been reading. So I'd like to read the second section we read from the beginning of Luke and now we're going to read from verse 57 of this chapter to the end of the chapter, the birth of John the Baptist that's entitled. I think that's what's in your bulletin sheet as well. It's on page 856. Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth and she bore a son and her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her and they rejoiced with her and on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child and they would have called him Zechariah after his father but his mother answered no, he shall be called John and they said to her none of your relatives are called by this name and they made signs to his father inquiring what he wanted him to be called and he asked for a writing tablet and wrote his name is John and they all wondered and immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed and he spoke blessing God and fear came on all their neighbors and all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea 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 on and his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy

Spirit and prophesied saying blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us the house of his servant David. He spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us to show them mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant the oath that 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 our days and you child will be called the prophet of the most high for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins because of the tender mercy of our God whereby the sun rise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the ways of peace and the child grew and became strong in spirit and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance in Israel. Okay so there we have the story which is well known

I guess to most of us the story of the birth of John the Baptist and I want to put up a completely different text this morning because I do feel that it strongly links into this story so from Ephesians chapter 3 and verse 20. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think according to the power at work within us and when Paul says that he is speaking about knowing the length and the breadth and the height and the depth of God's love and that God is able to answer our prayers to know more about his love so that we can serve him and recognize him as our rescuer and our redeemer. Our greatest need this morning therefore as Christians or even if we are not Christians this morning is to know God's love for us that's the greatest need we have in our lives and to see that love as something that is above and beyond what we can imagine you know we shrink it down to very small sizes and we may be appropriate it similarly to the way we appropriate human love but it ought to be the focus of our prayers as it was for Paul to the church in Ephesus that we would know the love of God fully because he says it's the fullness of God and then he goes on to say give us this prayer that this prayer is that he can do exceedingly above and beyond what we can ask or think. Now very briefly I want to see that in the life of Zechariah and Elizabeth and

then look at the birth of John just for a few minutes before the baptism slightly later. So we've got these two characters we've got Zechariah and we've got Elizabeth they're both believers they're both Christians if we can call them

Christians before Jesus they are certainly believers in the Lord God as their redeemer and Savior and we're told they're righteous they're blameless above reproach they're consistent in their faith and in their life doesn't mean they're perfect far from it but they were people who lived with a short account before God they went into His presence a lot they asked for forgiveness they recognized they were sinners needing a Savior and they had that relationship with God righteous blameless but they were married together it's hard to be married apart they were married together and they did live with heartache they lived with a long term heartache because they were childless and in the society in which they lived that it was a deeply troubling experience for them the perception the wrong perception was that to be childless was to be under God's judgment to be under His disgrace and that they must be harboring some kind of secret sin for God not to bless them in such way so they lived with this great conundrum this great paradox this great difficulty in their lives they were serving and following God but they felt that they weren't under God's blessing His favor and the oppression of people around them and the kind of judgmental eyes and the smarting looks were difficult for them as they lived their lives but Zechariah's profession was his job was he was a priest so he took very much to do with the religious life of the Jewish people and of the worship in the sanctuary that was where he spent his time involving himself in the worship of the sanctuary and that was his workplace his workplace was the temple that's where he went to work the place where God's presence was manifested to the people and all the symbolism of the temple and all its rituals pointed to God the character of God and pointed forward to the sacrifice of Jesus which was to come God's intentions and one of the things that happened in the temple was the incense was offered up to God so incense was taken and it was it was burnt incense was burned on the offering the sacrifice of offering and it was offered up to God along with the prayers of the priest and it was this visual and sensual and I mean by that appeal to the senses a sign of praying in God's presence through sacrifice through the altar of sacrifice which spent that it came there needed to be you know the shedding of blood which pointed forward to the coming of Jesus and it was done continually morning and night this need for continual prayer before the living God and the priest represented the people before God so that was his workplace that was his job that was his marriage that was his family and we come to this bit which gives us the career highlight of his life the high point of any priest's life in the ancient Near East this time in Judea was to be chosen by lot to enter the sack into the holy place and offer the prayer of thanksgiving and petition before God and offer up the incense on behalf of the people that would be for the priest his highlight was the best day of his life it was the pinnacle of his career but like me being chosen to be moderator but a million times better than that it's not really been the pinnacle of my career

playing for oh I've forgotten the name of the team it was that much of a pinnacle my career yeah anyway my mind's gone blank so I'll not say it because it's obviously wrong and ungodly to talk about it so anyway this was the pinnacle of his career was to offer the incense and from this day on he would be called rich and holy by all the people because he'd been chosen by God as it were through lot through the offering of lots to have this position so it was a really special day for him really important highlight of his life but it was nothing compared to what was to come and in a sense he sees the answer to God's love and God doing exceedingly above and beyond what he could ask you to even think in the answer to his prayer now it says that he prays in verse 13 it says that he prays in the temple we're not told what he did pray and a lot of people presume that it would have been a personal prayer and that he would pray as he would have done for many many years that they would be able to have a child now that is perfectly possible and it's perfectly legitimate to consider that because the angel goes on to say your prayer has been answered and you shall have a child and it may well be that that's what you've prayed but it's also probably much more likely that as the representative of the people praying a prayer that he was meant to pray publicly as it were and in an official role he would be offering a prayer of thanksgiving to God because it was the insensitive thanksgiving and also praying for the coming of the Messiah that would have been part of his petitionary prayers on behalf of the people as they waited outside and heard his prayers and for 400 years they'd been doing that it was silence for 400 years it was as if God hadn't answered any of their prayers and it was silence and yet he thought well it's my turn I better pray

[11:37] I better pray for the coming of the Messiah it's been 400 years without anything will happen now but he prayed that prayer and the answer was immediate and wildly extravagant it's a

remarkable a quick and powerful answer a prayer here spooky the angel Gabriel is there and tells him not to be afraid brings him comfort and tells him that he will have a child in his old age beyond hope given up for years maybe maybe they'd even stopped praying that prayer because they were old people by now but beyond that he says this son of yours which is to be born will be the forerunner for the Messiah so both of his prayers if he offered both of these prayers were remarkably fused together in God's answer to him the silence of 400 years is over and how in this amazing way so much so that like the rest of us probably would be he doubted he did oh come on he had an angel in front of him but he's still doubted that can't possibly be the case it's too amazing so he was given nine months of silence to work it through and pray through his doubt there's so many things we can't really go into this morning we're just going to skim over the surface but it's a really great picture of people of faith and the battles of faith and the reality of God intervening in our lives and I would want you as a Christian to keep going back to Ephesians chapter three the verse that we had at the beginning of the chapter which speaks about a prayer for the people of God for the people of God in Ephesus and also for us that we would know more and more of the love of God which because it's the fullness of God it's it's all we can want and when we make that prayer he is able to show us his love in ways that are above and beyond what we can ask or think pray to know that because

God loves us through our barrenness our brokenness and our need and we have the privilege today of knowing what he has done on the cross and knowing that he is already done for us exceedingly above and beyond what we can ask or think and what he's already done on the cross of Jesus Christ and what lies before us as Christians is beyond our wildest dreams and we need to keep that focus and remember that focus as it's expressed in the life of Zechariah and Elizabeth that's the first thing I want to say is the surprising love of God and we I think we need to be surprised by his love I think it's all very plain I can speaking personally it can be like that and I'm not astounded I'm not challenged to ask God for more revelation of his love in in my life and we need to do that the second thing I want to point out from this story is the supernatural and the historical lie side by side in this story in this account so you've got something cosmic and big and also something absolutely down to earth and historical now you remember Luke because we've just finished in our church we've just finished Luke going through Acts which is his second epistle as it were his second book and this is his first book and he's a doctor and he's he's determined to give an orderly account of the gospel and the the beginnings of the gospel through Jesus Christ and therefore it's a matter of fact you know we know that don't we but most doctors pretty matter of fact the bedside manner pretty matter of fact sometimes lack a bit of empathy softness bear watch what I'm saying congregation is full of doctors you're all very empathetic and loving but sometimes the stereotype is that doctors maybe lack that little bit of sensitivity in the in the way because they're matter of fact and two things but it's but and Luke is that matter of fact and he's not it's not even he's writing to Jewish people generally writing to our Gentile audience people who wouldn't necessarily been familiar with the supernatural in the way that

Jews would have but in this story quite right at the beginning he just in a matter of fact way speaks about an angel angel Gabriel coming there's prophecy before it happens of the imminent coming of the Messiah and of John the Baptist is preparing the way speaking through the prophecies of the Old Testament about the great plan of God there's there's this great miraculous event going on in historical reality in Judea the reign of Herod during the Roman occupation with a real and very ordinary families Zechariah and Elizabeth who will miraculously have a child in a rolled age and that's maybe just a an incidental point to note in this passage but it's the unashamed balance of scripture from beginning to end it's the unashamed presentation that we have in the Bible all the time of the supernatural and the historical side by side unashamedly so that it's just and it can't be any other way and we can't think any other way about the gospel or about the Bible or about its truth it's it's the reality of God breaking in to our very real ordinary historic world it's the reality of an unseen spiritual world influencing the physical and material world in which we live and we live in days which are hugely focused on the material on the physical and what we can see and feel and touch as if there's nothing else and yet God makes clear that there is more to life than that simple material reality that there is spiritual reality and so we can unashamedly and I hope not with with by brain we're not brain dumping we're not the other use of brain dumping we're not dumping our brain and we're not dumping our knowledge and our intelligence and our scientific mindsets and everything else that we believe in and know we can unashamedly say we believe in angels and we believe in

demons and in the virgin birth and in Christ walking on water and in the stone rolled away and in Christ being raised from the dead and Christ returning one day to judge this world He comes into history He breaks into the ordinary and touches even today the ordinary life of millions and millions of people who come to faith in Him as Lord and God and that's our hope that's our longing that's our prayer for today it's our prayer for tonight for the carol service that God will be with us that He will challenge and arrest and stop and pour out His love on those who don't know Him and in us who do so that's the second thing it's a supernatural and historical side by side and briefly we see the angel speaks I'm not going to say much really about this side of things and it is important the angel Gabriel speaks and he says don't be afraid this is your child will bring joy and delight to you as your child is going to have a calling his calling is to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah and that too is hugely significant the message that he brings how often to the point of ad nauseam have I said in this pulpit that God continually tells us in this message not to be afraid isn't that great again and again and again why because we are prone to fear and because it is sometimes overwhelming in our lives both to Zechariah in a very intense and very real way and also to us we take that same message and the principles of that message to ourselves often the gospel the supernatural the divine the unknown the whole concept and speaking of death it evokes fear within us and yet God often will come and he comes through the angel Gabriel then and he comes through His word today reminding us again and again not to be afraid because he knows the future and as we entrust our lives to him we are engulfed in his protection and his love and it may be as young parents today there's fears fears about bringing up children fears about inadequacy as parents fears about going cross-eyed with a lack of sleep all kinds of fears and even in these practical things

God reminds us as we have these precious realities of babies and children around us and of love for one another and of family in Christ not to be afraid but to entrust ourselves to the living God it's a repeated message that he brings to us and I think at a very ordinary human level he reminds Zechariah and Elizabeth that the child would bring them much joy and delight and I think that is a simple recognition at a very human level that that is what children bring to us in our lives as parents they bring joy and delight and heartache and pain and sleepless nights and grief and worry but joy and delight and we remember that and we remember them as God's gifts and we remember that you as you have grown up and now are old and mature we're also children and that your life has been a joy and a delight and that God sees you and sees every person as a joy and a delight as a gift from him and it is important to know and recognize and remember the ordinariness of who we are the ordinariness of family life and yet within that that it is part of God's purpose and plan for us to recognize every single individual as being his gift and every single life has been precious at that level and just as John the Baptist's life had a purpose that he was to be the forerunner who would bring the message of the coming Messiah to the people so we all have a calling and a purpose and we believe that for Rhea and we believe that for all the children here and we believe it for ourselves that we are calling for who of us have got a purpose like John the Baptist who have such a high and noble calling in life that set apart and have an angelic announcements of our life's purpose and plan but take a look at Matthew chapter 11 and verse 11 if that can maybe go up on the screen Matthew 11 verse 11 where Jesus says about John the Baptist truly I say to you among those born of women there is no one greater than John the Baptist yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he and we don't have time to exegete that but we recognize and see and know that we have a great calling as believers and a great focus of God's love in our lives and a purpose as we pray and commit our lives to him that is going to honor him and glorify him and because of who we are and who we have in Christ we have this great calling that is greater than even the calling John the Baptist had and then lastly and very briefly we see Zechariah's joyful response and we read that in the song that he prophetic song that he penned the prophecy and from verse 67 onwards and this chapter is the first time that the phrase good news is used and it is indeed great news and the response once they'd overcome fear the response was very positive and joyful and celebratory we see it with Elizabeth who sings a song of joy and

[25 : 09] delight in what is happening we see it with Zechariah and then of course we see it with Mary who all responded with great joy and praise and worship to God for what he's doing and Zechariah in his song he gives thanks you know he would have offered a prayer of thanksgiving in the temple on behalf of the people maybe this was very different it's much more kind of personalized much more passionate wasn't just ritualistic or formulaic he was thankful to God that the God has answered the prayers of the people and he's going to redeem his people as he had

done in the past but in the coming of the Messiah speaks of the great deliverance that would be wrought by God and he speaks prophetically about the place of his son that the son would prepare his ways to give knowledge of salvation to his people and then he speaks beautifully and very at the end of his praise he speaks beautifully very prophetically about Jesus I'm not going to say much about this at all because I'm going to it's going to be my theme for tonight at the short address at the Carol service but he speaks about this because of the tender mercy of our God in verse 78 whereby the sunrise the rising sun shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet into the ways of peace short beautiful prophetic message about the kind of Savior Jesus would be and I'm not going to start unpacking that because I'll just be repeating what I'm saying tonight but it is it is beautiful and it reminds us of the miraculous again of this prophetic message that John was given not just only about his own son but also about the Redeemer who would come and bring light into darkness and who would guide our feet into the ways of peace so his response to this remarkable outpouring of God's love into his heart and into his life through answered prayer and through this great trigger of divine activity after years and years centuries of silence with the coming of Jesus the most momentous event that the history of this universe has ever known and understood is joy and his praise is to look to God in praise and thanksgiving and I do wonder sometimes particularly as I look at my own life at the lack of joy and responsive praise to God and to his goodness we grumble we moan we are kind of plowing a hard furrow sometimes we feel the poor me's just overwhelming us and there's a need for us I think to go back again and again to the Ephesians prayer that God will show us his the width and the height and the depth and the length of his love because that is the fullness of God and he goes on to say as we pray that prayer he's able to do exceedingly above and beyond what we can ask and even think we need that as people in our lives we need it in our marriages we need it with our children we need it in our relationships with our colleagues we need to be understanding appreciate his love more and more so that we're able to praise him and respond to him as we hear his voice fear is distilled and taken from us and joy and delight replace that and we look for that and I think it's good to look for that and it's good to seek that more in our lives and recognize him and respond to him and joy it's not a slapstick joy and it's not a false joy it's not a kind of putting on a smiley face in the midst of everything that's happening it's a deep seated recognition of where we are who identity is where we're going how much he loves us and a response can be joy for that I sometimes think when I sing that it is I end singing and that praising and hymns and Psalms and I don't even know I've sung and sometimes I think in congregations we look around at congregations we think well if they look in their faces is it is any reflection of the feeling in their hearts and it must be pretty joyless and grim and miserable no I'm not saying we all need to smile we don't need to do that but there's that sense of intensity and and response and reality and maybe the joy is very very deep but now and again nice to let it show nice just to let it blossom nice to sing with enthusiasm and passion as if we're singing to the living God and it's easy as it must have been for Zechariah to ritualistically although privileged make his prayer of thanksgiving and expect just to come out at the end of that and nothing to have changed and isn't that easy for us in our worship is it easy for us in our lives to read the word pray pray come to church leave again nothing's different and we we haven't looked for that sense of the presence and reality and expectation that comes from the living God we all come with different needs different weaknesses different strengths different joys and different sorrows but we seek to bring them before the one and pray for a greater understanding in it all as Christians of his love the height depth length and breadth of it in order that we can know the fullness of God that's our deepest prayer for one another and it will be our deepest prayer for Rhea and our deepest prayer for all the children and indeed for all of us in church so let's bow our heads and pray before the baptism today Father God we thank you for who you are we thank you for your grace we ask for forgiveness when we treat that grace as an ordinary thing as a plain and dull thing even or a distant thing and we ask that we would wrestle in our lives before the God who is revealed in Paul's prayer as that great God of outstanding love God of provision God of grace and God who in Christ reveals himself to be the one who loves us more than any can ever love and is the fullness of God as we recognize that so may we come and trust take away our fear bless us we pray and bless us together at this happy time as we celebrate and as we participate in the sacrament of baptism and we pray and ask that you would remind us of your covenant again and again your commitment of your promises and of your goodness and grace to us we ask and pray we would know and see that more clearly with

each passing day in Jesus name amen