

The Miraculous Birth of John the Baptist

Scripture: Luke 1:56-66

Code: 42-15

As we turn together to the Word of God, I invite you to open your Bible to Luke's gospel. We are approaching the end of this great first chapter of Luke. Luke is unfolding for us the story of Jesus Christ. And in his unique and wonderful and inspired way, giving us profound insight into redemptive history as he describes the conception and birth both of John the Baptist and of the Lord Jesus Himself.

The text before us, Luke 1:56 to 66, is the account of the birth of John, called the Baptist for his baptizing ministry and being the prophet who was the forerunner of the Messiah, Jesus Christ Himself. Let me read this text to you, Luke 1:56..."And Mary stayed with her about three months and then returned to her home. Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth and she brought forth a son. And her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed great mercy toward her and they were rejoicing with her. And it came about that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, they were going to call him Zacharias after his father. And his mother answered and said, 'No indeed, he shall be called John.' And they said to her, 'There's no one among your relatives who is called by that name.' And they made signs to his father as to what he wanted him called. And he asked for a tablet and wrote as follows: His name is John. They were all astonished and at once his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed and he began to speak in praise of God. And fear came on all those living around them and all these matters were being talked about in all the hill country of Judea. And all who heard them kept them in mind saying, 'What then will this child turn out to be? For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him.'"

That last comment, "For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him," really does set the stage for what I want you to see in this account. It is a simple narrative. You weren't at all confused in reading it. Very easy to understand what happened. A child was born. People were there. They felt that it was appropriate to name him after his father. But his parents indicated his name was to be John. A miracle occurred that gave back to Zacharias his hearing and his speech and wonder filled everyone about what this child would become.

A very simple story. But there's something here that jolts us in the final statement. "For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him." As much as the story appears to be about Zacharias and the miracle that loosed his tongue, as much as the story might appear to be about Elizabeth, giving birth in her old age, as much as the story might appear to be a story about the child John, the great significance of his life and ministry, the story is really a story about God. God is the main player in

this drama. God is the main actor. It is the hand of the Lord that Luke wants us to see here. And this is not just true of this story, it's true of everything in Scripture. Psalm 19:7 calls the Bible the testimony of the Lord. Scripture is God's only self-disclosure.

First and foremost the Bible is the revelation of God. It is His own word on Himself. More than anything else it is His story. Behind Zacharias and behind Elizabeth and behind Mary and behind John and even behind the coming of Jesus is the great and mighty revelation of God. His nature, His character, His works, His purpose, His will, He is being revealed. In fact, at all points in the Bible, God is teaching the truth about Himself. He is the one dominating figure in biblical revelation. The Bible simply is a book about God. It starts with God and it ends with God and everything in between is about Him.

I have learned long ago no matter what passage I'm studying to be looking for the revelation of God in that given passage. Every passage reveals something about God. Pursuing the knowledge of God in every portion of Scripture is a rich and rewarding enterprise. And how could it be avoided here when Luke makes a comment at the end of the passage in verse 66 and says, "For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him." Everything in the story of John the Baptist evidenced the mighty intervention of God.

You cannot understand the angelic annunciation to Zacharias when Gabriel was sent from God to Zacharias, as we saw in chapter 1, when he was in offering incense on the altar of incense, and the angel appeared and gave him a word from God and told him he would have a son. And you see the intervention of God through His Word, through His angel and through the miracle of conception that happened when Zacharias went home and in their sixties, seventies or eighties, those barren people were able to have the first child in their life.

You see the hand of God as He comes to Mary through again the angel Gabriel. We saw that starting in verse 26 of the first chapter, and unfolded to Mary this incredible reality that she would conceive a child without a man. And God would literally, miraculously plant a fetus in her womb and bring it to full size and to birth and that child would be the Son of God, the Savior of the world.

God's hand is in all of this. And certainly His hand was in the miraculous striking of Zacharias deaf and mute, which He did as a judgment on his unbelief. And His hand was also evidenced when Zacharias was loosed from that divine chastening and spoke. The hand of God is everywhere here. And Luke wants us to be sure we're seeing it, so he reminds us at the end of verse 66.

In fact, Luke as a historian is writing divine history, inspired in his mind by the self-revealing God, and so his concern, that we know this is divine history. As the gospel of Luke begins, Luke is especially concerned that we see the movement of God, the purpose of God, the plan of God for redemption unfolding. And Luke focuses on staggering supernatural events, two miracle conceptions, two

miracle births and some attendant miracles that go along with them. And then the coming of John and the coming of Jesus and a plethora of miracles explodes on the world through the power of Jesus and the Apostles to whom He delegated that power.

The reality is that God is acting in human history. God who has been silent for 400 years, God who hasn't done a miracle in over 400 years or a series of miracles in perhaps 500 years. God who hasn't sent a visible angel to earth in that same amount of time is now acting in history. Luke wants his readers to see God being revealed. God launching the greatest era of redemptive history, the coming of the Savior of the world. He reminds us to look for God.

In Israel a birth was cause for great joy and celebration as it is today, especially if the child, and I hate to say this, was a boy. It wasn't right but it was the tradition that when the birth came, the friends would come, the neighbors would come and the family would come even from afar and they would be ready to celebrate because they would hire the local musicians to come to accompany the music of celebration after the child was born. And some Jewish writers tell us when the son was born, the gathered crowd would break into music and song. And some writers tell us that if the child was a girl, the musicians went silently away as it was a birth of sadness. It wasn't right, but it was the tradition. And the New Testament overturned that as the Apostle Paul in his wonderful way said in Christ there is neither male nor female and did everything he could to exalt women to the place where they deserve in the economy of God and not where the Pharisaical, legalistic, Judaistic tradition had placed them.

Well it was a boy. And so we can assume that the celebration went on in the common tradition. But even more so because this was an old man and an old woman, barren, never able to have children having a child, and this wasn't just any child either. You know, they...they knew that the child was a unique child cause it had been told that this child would be the forerunner of the Messiah, that he would be great, that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, that he would turn many of the hearts of the children of Israel toward righteousness, that he would make the way prepared for the Messiah to come. He was to be the last great pre-messianic prophet, not just any child. And so there was a great, great celebration. Lots to celebrate, the character of the child, the amazing miracle of the conception, the joy of these barren people finally having a child and a son at that, and a prophet at that, and the forerunner of Messiah at that.

But as great as their joy, ours, I think, can be greater. They're still asking the question in verse 66, "What then will this child turn out to be?" We know the answer, don't we? We know what he was like. We know about his life. We know about his preaching. We know about his impact. We know that all of Jerusalem and Judea was pouring out to hear him preach when he grew older and preached in the wilderness. We know that the population was getting baptized with the baptism of repentance, confessing sins, getting ready for the Messiah. We know what a preacher of righteousness he was. We know what a preacher against sin he was. We know that he confronted

sinner in high places and it cost him his life, he was beheaded for his faithfulness to preach repentance. We know he announced, "The Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world," we know that he was, in fact, the forerunner of Messiah. We know Messiah came. We know He lived. We know He died. We know He rose. We know He ascended. We know He sent His Holy Spirit, established His church of which we are a part. We know He intercedes for us now. Will come in glory to take us to be with Himself, establish His Kingdom which is eternal. We know all of that. If their joy was great, ours ought to be greater.

Now Luke wonderfully mingles the two conception and birth narratives. First he gives us the wonderful story of Gabriel coming to Zacharias and the miracle conception between Zacharias and Elizabeth. Then he moves to the miracle conception that occurred by God in the womb of Mary and tells us that story. Now in this passage he goes back to the story of Zacharias and Elizabeth to tell the birth narrative. And when this one is concluded he will then tell the birth narrative of Jesus, which starts in chapter 2.

Two conception miracles, two birth miracles, two mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, two fathers, Zacharias and God...he weaves these narratives together and there's always the stamp of divine miracle power on them. God is putting Himself on display. And Luke in very precise and very sequential way tells the stories, mingling them and yet paralleling them. In each case it's the story of a birth and a circumcision and a naming and praise. That's what we'll see in the birth of John and that's exactly the sequence we'll see in chapter 2 in the birth of Jesus.

Now as we look at the narrative before us, God puts Himself on display in three ways here. In three ways we see the hand of God. First, number one, the promise of God is veracious. Now I'm going to educate you a little bit. That's a new word, it's not voracious, that's different. Veracious, v-e-r-a, it means true. It's a good word. It also allows me to alliterate my outline. But it's a good word. Veracious, not voracious, make the difference.

The word veracious means true...it means true. The promise of God is true and that's what the story shows us. We see the hand of the Lord here fulfilling His promise. Verses 56 to 58, verse 56, Mary, you remember, had gone down after she had received word from the angel Gabriel that she would become with child, pregnant, that she was bearing in her womb would be planted there by God miraculously. She was probably a thirteen-year-old girl. She was certainly a virgin. She was betrothed to a young man, but they had not consummated that relationship. The wedding had not yet occurred. When she was told by the Holy Spirit that she would be pregnant and she would be bearing a child, she realized there would be a very difficult assignment on the part of everybody around her to understand that. If a thirteen year old appears pregnant, there are lots of explanations, having a child planted in your womb by God isn't one that's easy to sell. But there was one woman who would understand, that was one who was in her womb even then bearing a child that had been granted to her by God through a conception miracle and she had had a similar encounter with the

angel Gabriel. She would understand. And so when Mary was informed that Elizabeth, her cousin, was pregnant by the power of God, she went immediately to the one woman who would understand her situation and could vouch for the reality of it. She stayed with her three months.

Apparently from the flow of the text she left in the ninth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy and went, it says, in verse 56, to her home. Not yet wed to Joseph, she went back to the home of her mother and father. After her returning, the story goes back to pick it up from verse 25, back to Elizabeth. And it says, "Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth and she brought forth a son and her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her and they were rejoicing with her."

Luke's words here are very carefully chosen...very carefully chosen to prove to us, to show to us that God's Word is veracious, it is true. And we shouldn't question that. Numbers 23:19 says, "God is not a man that He should lie." Joshua 23:14 says, "Not one word of all the good words that the Lord your God spoke concerning you has failed. All have been fulfilled for you, not one of them has failed," which was Joshua's farewell speech. First Kings 8:56, "Blessed be the Lord according to all that He promised, not one word has failed of all His good promise which He promised." Psalm 89:14, "Loving kindness and truth go before you." Psalm 86 says, "You are abundant in truth." And Psalm 146 says, "God keeps truth forever." That's why Isaiah calls Him in Isaiah 65:16, "The God of truth." Titus 1:2 Paul says, "God who cannot lie." Hebrews 6:18, "It is impossible for God to lie." And Jesus gave the greatest attestation in John 17:17 when He said, "Thy word is truth."

When God speaks, He speaks the truth. And God had spoken in a prophecy and God had said, verse 13, through the angel to Zacharias, "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you will give him the name John and you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth." And that is exactly what Luke says happened. Verse 57, "She brought forth a son," verse 58, "And they were rejoicing with her." The...the angel had said from God, you'll have a son and many will rejoice, and that is precisely what happened. And Luke records it with great precision to make the point that God's word is true. He's putting God on display here.

This tells us what we need to know about Zacharias. It tells us what we need to know about Elizabeth. It tells us what we need to know about John. More than that, it tells us what we need to know about God, that when He speaks it's the truth. It's the truth. That's the important issue here.

Verse 57 says, "The time had come." The great epoch had arrived, the monumental moment of the birth of John, the prophet who was the forerunner to Christ. Here is the launch event of the coming of the Savior of the world. This triggers everything. The forerunner comes, then the Messiah comes, then the work of redemption is accomplished. Time had come for Elizabeth to give birth. Nine months of pregnancy was completed, she was now ready to give birth. And indeed she did, "And she brought forth a son." Exactly as God through the angel Gabriel had promised. The Word of God, as

always, is true. And she rejoiced...she rejoiced I'm sure beyond many mothers because of her life-long barrenness and the stigma that she had endured through that, she was even called "the barren one," as you remember. A terrible stigma for a Jewish lady to bear. And joy beyond even that because the child that she had been given was not just any child, he was great, filled with the Spirit. He was the forerunner to the Messiah. He would turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. He would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, the disobedient would take up the attitude of the righteous. People would be made ready for the coming of the Messiah.

God was giving her not just any child. So her joy was wonderful. She may have been like Sarah. Sarah was so happy when she had Isaac. I mean, she was in her nineties then. She had been barren all her life. She finally got a son and she couldn't stop laughing. Genesis 21:6 says she just laughed and laughed and laughed and named the child "laughter," Isaac. Well, I'm sure Elizabeth had a similar joyous experience.

Verse 58 indicates the prophecy regarding others rejoicing came to pass. Her neighbors who would come from near and her relatives, probably coming from further distances, living in various places, heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her and they were rejoicing with her. Just precisely and exactly as Gabriel had told her they would when they heard the Lord had displayed His mercy toward her. It was mercy. What is mercy? God's favor...God's kindness...God's goodness. Mercy is God's loving action to undeserving people. God's loving action to undeserving people. God is good. We read that in Psalm 73. God by nature is good. God shows favor and kindness. The Old Testament word is chesed, loving kindness. It's part of God's nature. And He was good to this old couple. He acted toward them with kindness though they were undeserving.

Mary knew that. She celebrated God's mercy too. In the wonderful praise of Mary in verse 50, she says, "His mercy is upon generation after generation." Further in her praise in verse 54 she mentions the fact that God has given help to Israel, His servant, in remembrance of His mercy. And later on, Zachariah will praise God and in verse 72 he celebrates the fact that God chose mercy. Mercy is somewhat of a theme here as sinners being so profoundly blessed by God recognize their unworthiness and God's loving action toward undeserving people.

When the people realized that God had been merciful, and God had showed this great favor, and God had demonstrated His great goodness to this old couple who were righteous and who had all their lifelong wanted so much to have a child, when they knew that it had happened, they came and they shared her joy. And the act that they rejoiced was a fulfillment of the Word of God. God who promised, Hebrews 10:23. is faithful. That's important because God also promises salvation to those who call upon Him. God promises that whoever comes to Him He will receive. God promises that when we confess our sins He'll forgive them. God promises forgiveness to those who ask. He promises heaven to those who cry for it. He promises strength to the weak. He promises wisdom to the ignorant. He promises riches to the poor. He promises answered prayer to those who cry to Him.

He promises blessing to those who ask. He promises heaven to those who seek it.

Don't you want to know that He keeps His promises? He does. And so we learn in the outset of the story that the promise of God is true, veracious. Secondly, now you'll know why I used that word, the purpose of God is gracious...the purpose of God is gracious.

The second thing we learn about God here is that His unfolding purpose is gracious. And this is a wonderful, wonderful part of the story. Verse 59, "It came about that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they were going to call him Zacharias after his father, and his mother answered and said, 'No indeed, he shall be called John.' And they said to her, 'There's no one among your relatives who is called by that name.' And they made signs to his father as to what he wanted him called. And he asked for a tablet and wrote as follows, 'His name is John.' And they were all astonished."

Now we shouldn't be shocked that God is gracious. That's all over the Scripture. But this little vignette really points it out in a wonderful, wonderful way. God, we know, is a God of grace and His purpose toward sinners is to be gracious. His purpose in salvation is to put His grace on display before all, including the angels who otherwise would never see His grace unless there were some sinners to whom He could be gracious. Thus He allowed sin in order that He might display grace and thereby be glorified for His grace which is an attribute which can only be displayed in the forgiveness of sins. God delights in being gracious. He delights in giving sinners what they don't deserve. He delights in saving them from sin and death and hell. Ephesians 1:9 describes God in this way, and I think it's a great praise. It says, "God has kind intentions toward us." God who is infinitely holy, who hates sin, and hates persistent sinners still has kind intentions toward us. That's why in 1 Peter 5:10 it calls Him, "The God of all grace." Psalm 84:11 says, "He gives grace." Hebrews 4 says, "When you go to the throne of God, when you approach His holy, majestic throne, you are approaching...I love this...the throne of grace." God's grace is described in the Bible as great, sovereign, rich, exceeding, manifold, all-sufficient, abundant and glorious. And we're going to be exposed to His grace not just in time but in eternity because it says in Ephesians 2 that in eternity He's going to pour out the riches of His grace and His kindness toward us. That's why 1 Peter 3:7 says we are heirs of grace. We will inherit an eternal grace. Romans 6:14 says, "For now, we're under grace." And where sin abounds...what?...grace much more abounds. And grace came by Christ...grace came by Christ.

This comes through in this little conflict that ensues. Let me give you the story. The eighth day arrived, and on the eighth day it was necessary to circumcise this little Jewish baby. That was by God's law...that was by God's law. Genesis 17:9 to 14 introduces circumcision and Leviticus 12 gives us a very simple straightforward definition of circumcision. On the eighth day, it says in verse 3, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised, cut off. That's circumcision. And it's kind of a strange thing in some way. The question might be asked...why is that done? If God felt that it was better for that to

be done, why did He create people without doing that...why did He allow a foreskin to be there if it was something to be removed? He is the creator, He made man as man. Why did He do that?

Well, the answer, I think, is unique. It's three-fold. If you understand this you understand circumcision in its dimensions. First of all, there was a physical reason. There was the reason of perpetuating the nation Israel. In history, you can read medical records, Jewish women have had the lowest rate of cervical cancer and other infections and that is because there is a physical cleansing that occurs. Not so much in our modern hygienic world but through ancient times. This had a benefit physically, and that was part of God perpetuating the people of Israel in order to achieve His messianic purposes and thus He allowed them to have this special protection.

He gave them many medical formulas, many dietary laws that perpetuated them as well, protected them from unnecessary infections and illnesses. So there was a first physical significance to this, but secondly, God wanted them to have a special mark that nobody else had that identified them with the Abrahamic Covenant. And so there was a national purpose as well as a physical one, and that was that they would bear a unique sign and symbol that they belonged to Abraham's seed. They were therefore part of the Abrahamic Covenant, the people of God. So there was a physical protection, there was a national identification.

Thirdly, there was a spiritual symbol in that. And I think this is important to understand. God was showing them by that their sinfulness. Now if I wanted to define how profound man's sin is, if I wanted to define for you how systemic or how endemic, how deep-seeded and pervasive the sin of man is, where would I go to prove that to you? Somebody might say, "Well you can tell it by what people say." But some people can't talk and some people can guard their words very well and I might not hear them say anything that would reveal the depth of their depravity. And even people who do occasionally say things that indicate their sin, by so saying don't necessarily show me how profound that depravity is.

You say, "Well, if you just watch what they do." Well I can't necessarily see how profound their depravity is by what they do. Some people guard carefully what they do when I'm around and when you're around or when anybody's around. Most people don't sin in a crowd.

How do I really know how profoundly sinful man is? The best way to know that, very simple, procreation. If you want to know how wicked and how sinful a person is, you know it best by what they produce because we all produce sinners, right? I'm a Christian and I love the Lord and I serve the Lord. My children were all born depraved and my grandchildren are depraved and they are sinful to the core. So that the essential element of depravity is the component of my very nature which is passed on in procreation and that makes the point...how deep my sin is. And God was there for giving to Israel a lesson, an object lesson, a picture that they needed cleansing at a profound level of sin. In circumcision therefore there was that spiritual symbol.

So it was the eighth day and it was time to do this. To do this which protected them physically, which identified him uniquely with the Abrahamic promise, and which represented to everybody around, and would to him his whole life, the desperate need for spiritual cleansing because sin was so endemic. A little...the little child would be taken, a boy would be taken and usually the father did this. Sometimes women did it, in the case of Zipporah, the wife of Moses, who circumcised their child. Sometimes an appointed person did it. There's no necessary prescription in the Old Testament about who does it. But the tradition developed among the Jews that there needed to be, and probably a tradition later than this, but we don't, at least in terms of the number, but it was significant that when a circumcision occurred there was to be a witnessing group. Later on the tradition developed that there needed to be at least ten witnesses. For the sake of modesty in the future, there would need to be witnesses who could affirm that a circumcision actually did occur. So the tradition developed there had to be ten witnesses of the circumcision of a boy.

And so, there was the crowd there and appropriately so. No doubt ready to witness this as was the tradition. And in the process of this they circumcised the child and the group that were there decided that they should all participate in the naming of the child and they were going to call him Zacharias. So they had a little discussion among themselves and they all decided, I guess, uniformly that the child should be named after his father. That was a nice gesture, let's honor the man. I mean, he's a priest and he's served this little community. A couple of weeks a year, twice during the year, he goes down to the temple, the other eleven months of the year he's up here and he's caring for us and he's teaching us and he's serving us as a local priest in a little town in the hill country of Judea, a few miles out of Jerusalem. And he was beloved to them and he's gone through a life of sorrow and pain and he's never been able to have a child. And then, after all, for nine months he's been unable to hear, unable to speak, and we kind of feel sorry for the old guy. Why not give him a little joy at the end of his life and name the boy after him?

I mean, that's a nice gesture. Just as a footnote to that. Naming the child eight days after birth on the day of circumcision is not an Old Testament prescription. The Old Testament doesn't have any rule about when you name a child. It may have developed as a custom among some Jews by this time. And what may have sort of aided that custom was the Romans tended to name their child on the ninth day, that was sort of the Roman tradition. The Greeks did it on the seventh to the tenth day. And it just may have been that because the Jews were exposed to those kind of customs around them that they started doing it on the eighth day. It is also true that Moses was circumcised on the eighth...was named on the eighth day, the day he was circumcised. And Abraham's name went from Abram to Abraham on the day that he was circumcised. There was some Old Testament precedent for that.

Now we don't know that this was a widespread thing where children were not named until the eighth day. But at least this is what happened on this occasion and it must have been a custom at least in

this case. Universal custom or not, this is what they did. When all the folks came on the eighth day, they assumed that this is the day when we make the name official.

Now it wasn't unusual for people to participate in naming. Go back and read Ruth chapter 4 verse 17 when Naomi and Boaz had a baby boy, the people gathered around and the people all together collectively named him Obed. He became the father of Jesse, who was the father of David. So it sometimes was a kind of a group decision.

And also in Israel, names were very, very descriptive. And naming this child Zacharias would be such an honor to his father and it was a family name, although infrequently boys were named after their father. More frequently they would be named after their grandfather. And sometimes names were chosen to describe physical features. For example, if you go back and read Genesis 25, you read about the birth of Jacob and Esau. Jacob was named Jacob because Jacob means "one who grabs the heel." And Esau was named Esau because Esau means "hairy." And you remember the birth? Esau came out and the first remark was, "Boy, he's hairy." And he was hairy from then on. And Jacob came out and he had a hold of Esau's heel and Jacob means "one who holds the heel." And the idea is the supplanter, you know, trying to pull him back in there and get out first. So the conflict between those two guys was life-long and it started in the womb when they were fighting about who was going out the shoot first.

Sometimes names then were tied to physical features. Some Jewish names were designed to express the parents' joy, such as Saul or Samuel which means "asked for." And in the case of Samuel when Hannah was given her child which she had asked for, she named him "asked for." Some children were named to express the parent's faith. Elijah was one. His parents named him Elijah because Elijah means "Jehovah is my God." And his parents named him as a testimony to their faith in God.

Well it just seemed right to this group to name this baby Zacharias. Watch what happened. Verse 60, "And his mother answered and said, 'No indeed.'" In the Greek, *ou kai alla*(??), strong Greek emphatic, absolutely not. And, you know, I mean that would be a little hard to swallow. I mean, what do you have against the guy? Zacharias...I mean, what kind of an answer is that? "No indeed, but he shall be called John." What a great name. (Laughter) "This baby is named John," there's no discussion on this, this isn't a group decision.

Why did she say that? Well, back in verse 13 when the angel came, appeared to Zacharias, he said you'll bear a son, your wife, Elizabeth, will bear a son and you will give him the name John. Why does this matter? Lots of prophets named lots of different things, God never got involved with their parents, what's the difference what his name is? I mean, by any name he was the same guy. By any name he did the same thing. Why John? Why is this such an issue? Why is he to be called John? God doesn't get involved in naming everybody. God got involved in naming Jesus and God also got

involved in naming John. What about this? What is the significance of this?

John is a great name. It's a short form of a longer word, Jehohanan...Jehohanan. Just gets contracted into John. The first part of Jehohanan is Jeho...what's that? God...Jehovah. The latter part means grace. John means "God is gracious" and God wanted that child named "God is gracious" because God's purpose through that child and the Messiah he would declare was gracious. What you see in the story then is God telling us that His promise is veracious and His purpose is gracious. And He'll fight for that name because it identifies His purpose.

Well they didn't get it. John?...they said...John? Where did that come from? So they said to her in verse 61, "There's no one among your relatives who is called by that name." I mean, we don't get it. I mean, if you had a choice, why not honor your husband? But, I mean, pulling a name out of the air, what's the point? And they probably thought she had...she was a little decisive and absolute in the face of the fact that her husband hadn't gotten his input. Was she overstepping her bounds as a woman?

So, they went over her head and verse 62...now remember, Zacharias can't hear and he can't speak. He was struck miraculously by God and made deaf and mute. And so what did they do in verse 62? "They made signs to his father." Now they didn't know ASL..."made signs" may be a stretch. The actual Greek word means they kind of nodded, you know, like...you know, what's your input on this, Zach? What do you want him called?

This heightens the drama a little bit. By the way, it's clear to me that he was both unable to hear and unable to speak. The word that describes his silence is kophos and it's used in chapter 7 verse 22, 32, 37, chapter 9 verse 25 of Luke's gospel to refer to someone who was both deaf and mute. It's also used in the Septuagint translation of Habakkuk 2:18 and 19 to speak of idols that can't hear or speak. So I think he got the package, he couldn't hear and he couldn't talk. If he could hear, why in the world are they making signs to him?

Well he responded. Verse 63, "And he asked for a tablet." For nine months he had been having to write everything. The word "tablet" here is what Greek scholars call hapax legomena(?), it's the only time it ever appears in the New Testament. It's a wonderful little word and it's very descriptive. It describes a piece of wood, a board and what they would do is they would take a piece of thin board and then they covered it with wax and they would literally have a sharp object like a stick or maybe a stone in which he could write on the wax. Then he could rub the wax again and rub it out. It would be something that could be used again and again. And so this poor old guy had to be lugging this wax board around for nine months. Every time he wanted to communicate he had to write it out. Now we have people like that even here in our church congregation who have talking boards. And many times when I have conversations with them, some of them write, some of them even have little ticker machines they could punch letters and they come out, little typing things, and others of them

have word boards, they point to words. Some of them have letter boards. That was a similar situation with him and it was made out of wood and wax.

So he got his little board out and he wrote as follows...and people who communicate that way make short sentences and not long explanation because it's hard to carry the conversation if you go on too long. "So he wrote as follows, 'His name is John.'" No explanation, period. And they were all astonished. I mean, they didn't get it. They didn't understand why. It just didn't...where did it come from? And there was not given to them here any particular explanation.

By the way, the way he wrote it went like this, "John is his name." And the Greek always puts the emphatic in the first place in the sequence of the sentence. This boy was named by God and his name was going to be John because through Him the grace of God would explode on the world, right?

Now Jesus was named also with a unique name, but so was everybody else in this whole thing. In fact, you can unfold the whole opening of the plan of redemption by just looking at the names. First there was Zachariah which means "God remembers His promise." And God long ago had made a promise of a Messiah, of a Lamb, of a sacrifice, of a Savior. Elizabeth means "God is the absolute faithful one." God will keep that promise. John means "God is gracious." And Jesus means "Jehovah saves." The whole gracious purpose unfolds in the names.

You know, when God is this specific about a name, it's more than just trivial. What do you see in the story? His promises are true, His purposes are gracious. All of this is about God being gracious to the world. He's sending His grace and John is a key in that sending.

Final aspect of God's nature, His promise is veracious, His purpose is gracious, His power is wondrous. Something happens immediately in verse 64, "And at once his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed and he began to speak in praise of God." Now, folks, this is a...fill-in-the-blank...miracle. This is a miracle. This is a guy who can't hear and can't speak and instantaneously he can hear and speak. This is God's power on display. I mean, everywhere in the Scripture God's power is extolled. Psalm 62:11, "Power belongs to God." Over and over He's called El Shaddai, God Almighty, His power is defined in Scripture as great and strong and glorious and everlasting and sovereign and effective and irresistible and incomprehensible and incomparable and unsearchable. Matthew 19:26 says "All things are possible to God." Luke 1:37, you remember that, said, "Nothing is impossible with God." Genesis 18:14 says, "Nothing is too hard for God." And the heavenly hosts in Revelation 4 and 5 celebrate the power of God. He has power to create. He has power to sustain. He has power to govern. He has power to give life, take life. Power for miracles, for resurrections and for destructions. He is the all powerful God and His power is wondrous, it's awesome.

Notice in verse 64 the very important little phrase "and at once." Now let me just plant in your mind, that's a miracle phrase. You say, "What do you mean by that?" You're going to see that phrase repeated all throughout Luke's gospel and you see it through the book of Acts. Why? Because it's attendant to miracles. One of the things, I wrote about this years ago in the book I wrote on the Charismatics and the follow-up book on Charismatic Chaos, when you look at the healings of the New Testament, the healings of Jesus and the Apostles, they were all instantaneous. There was none of this TV evangelist approach where you've been healed now you go home and claim your healing and in a few weeks you'll feel better. There were healings that were absolutely instantaneous in every situation. And that's why "at once" is a critical component in the description of healings through Luke's gospel. Luke chapter 4, chapter 5, chapter 8, chapter 13, chapter 18, you're going to see that phrase associated with miracles. This then is a miracle noted by the use of that phrase which Luke repeats miraculously, instantaneously. "His mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed." And that, by the way, also is a fulfillment of a prophecy in verse 20, "You will be silent, unable to speak until the day when these things take place. And in the day when these things take place, you'll speak." And he did. And again, footnote to the first point, God's promise is true. He began to speak.

And what did he say? "He began to speak in...what?...praise of God." For nine months it had been pent up and the dam burst and he just started praising God. By the way, his praise turned to prophetic praise in verse 67, and you have it in the great and glorious paean of praise that runs from verse 67 to verse 79. And we'll look at that next time.

This old man began to praise God. The whole...the whole experience was so overwhelming and the power of God was so great and so incredible and so marvelous. And verse 65 says, "And fear came on all those living around them and all these matters were being talked about in all the hill country of Judea." The power of God is wondrous. It inspires wonder. It inspires fear. It inspires awe. Fear in the sense of awe, in the sense of recognition of divine intervention, heavenly action. This was an awe that was a sort of holy trauma, a kind of spiritual shock at what they had seen.

What caused this awe? A miracle conception and a miracle birth, a divinely given name from God and a powerful and instantaneous healing of a deaf and mute man. These awesome things were just the first. This is the first time you have a crowd in awe. And frankly, this sets the stage for awesome things all through the gospel of Luke as the awesome power of God through Jesus Christ creates continual wonder. You see the same in the book of Acts under apostolic power as well. The power of God is awesome...awesome, and they saw it in the miracle of the birth, in the miracle of the healing right before their eyes. And the buzz went everywhere, everybody was talking about it all over the hill country of Judea. "Oh..that old priest, Zacharias, he and his wife had a baby and they insisted that the name of the baby be 'God is gracious' and that baby is the forerunner of the Messiah and that baby was filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb. That baby is going to be used to turn the hearts of those people who are indifferent toward God back to God and that baby is going to grow up

and be a prophet and he's going to be the one who announces the arrival of Messiah. Messiah must be on the verge of coming. How do you know this is true? Because there was a miracle conception and because we saw with our eyes a miracle healing, a man who couldn't speak and couldn't hear, instantaneously could."

And verse 66 says as those people who were there and saw it began to spread it, and it started to be talked about all around the hillsides of Judea, it says in verse 66, "And all who heard them," that is those people who passed on what they saw, all who heard them pondered it." Kept them in mind means they pondered it, like Mary pondered these things in her heart. Later on in chapter 2 we'll see that, when she started hearing about her child, she pondered that which simply means there was a constant preoccupation about this...is this it? Is the Messiah coming? This is His forerunner. And it was all in their minds and they were saying, "What then will this child turn out to be?" Is this really the...the final prophet before Messiah? Is this it?

It became the main preoccupation of thought, and certainly the main topic of conversation as the wonder and the awe began to carry itself through that entire area. And so we see the power of God is wondrous. God put His power on display. He put His purpose on display, which is gracious. He put His promise on display which is always true. And I say the main character is God and so does Luke. The end of verse 66 he says, "For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him." Him, no doubt, referring to John the Baptist from the start.

By the way, that phrase "the hand of the Lord was certainly with him," is a common expression in the Old Testament. Some time you just look it up and trace it to the Old Testament, it always indicates God's mighty, powerful presence. God's holy presence. The inescapable conclusion Luke makes for us and for everybody else, folks, God is acting redemptively, graciously in human history.

And so, the wonderful Luke, beloved physician, the wonderful narrator, the wonderful historian is elevating the drama of the coming of the Savior of the world. God is moving in history.

Father, what a joy it is to be taken back, as it were, and being there through the riches of Scripture, to see the drama unfold. O Lord, we are struck by the consistency of Your nature. You speak and it is so. You purpose and it comes to pass. You act and it is awesome. You are the God of history. You are the author of history, History is Your story. You are the main player on the stage, the main actor in the drama. You are the one we see in every dimension of the unfolding of Scripture as You reveal Yourself to us. Thank You that we have come to know You personally as not just the God of history, but our God and Savior through Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave His life for us. We believe...we believe in You, we believe Your promise is true, Your purpose is gracious toward us, and Your power to effect that purpose is awesome and we praise You in Your Son's name. Amen.

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