

Lesson 1 | December 5, 2021

A New Era Begins

Study Text: Luke 1:1–25,57–80

Central Truth: The era of God’s grace that began with the birth of John the Baptist is still in effect today.

Key Verse: Luke 1:68

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people (KJV).

Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students should discover the significance of John the Baptist in relationship to the coming of the Messiah.
- Students will be challenged to believe God’s promises, even when they seem impossible.
- Students should commit to obey God, even when His instructions may seem illogical.

Introducing the Lesson

Say: We are beginning a study of the Gospel as recorded by Luke, a physician who was one of Paul’s traveling companions. From him we receive the most detailed account of Jesus’ birth, as well as the events before and after it. This lesson and the one to follow set the stage for one of the most familiar stories in the Bible.

Opening Activity—A New Beginning

Ask: What times in your life can you name that you would consider a new beginning for you? Examples might include salvation, a move to a new city, career change, marriage, etc.

Say: When Jesus came to earth, He brought a new beginning, both for God’s chosen people and for all of humanity. Just as God prepared the earth for humanity, He prepared the way for the coming of Jesus to the earth. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

John the Baptist was a key figure in the first coming of Christ. He served as Christ’s forerunner, calling people to repent in preparation for His coming. This message of repentance made him a celebrated figure among the Jewish people, in that corruption had arisen among the leaders in Jerusalem. As a result, John was extremely popular

among the people who desired spiritual reform. However, this message of repentance (and, therefore, a call to reformation) brought about opposition as well.

And so, **God raised up John to proclaim repentance and declare Christ, and John faithfully fulfilled that calling. The message of repentance remains important today, for repentance opens the heart to receive Christ's marvelous gift of grace: salvation and eternal life.**

Part 1—John's Birth Foretold

A Prayer Had Been Answered

Scripture Luke 1:5–13

[Luk 1:5-13 KJV] 1 Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, 2 Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; 3 It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, 4 That thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed. 5 There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife [was] of the daughters of Aaron, and her name [was] Elisabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. 7 And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were [now] well stricken in years. 8 And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, 9 According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense. 11 And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And when Zacharias saw [him], he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.

Say: While Zechariah and Elizabeth were disappointed that they had no children, they had likely given up praying for a child of their own. However like other godly people in

Israel, they would have been praying for the coming of the Messiah. Little did they know that their own lives would be so dramatically entwined with the answer to that prayer. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

As we examine John the Baptist's life, we see that the miraculous power of God played a central role in his ministry. This was true even in the announcement of his birth, described in detail by Luke. **John was born to a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth (Luke 1:5). They were both godly people and advanced in years, yet they had no children for Elizabeth was barren (verses 6–7). Zechariah served in a particular group of priests, which was ministering in the temple at the time of the events in this passage (verses 8–10). Centuries earlier, King David had separated the priests into divisions and determined the order in which they would serve (see 1 Chronicles 24:3). While Zechariah was serving his time of duty by burning incense in the temple at a time of prayer, the angel Gabriel appeared to him (Luke 1:11).**

This startled Zechariah, but the angel quickly assured him with some good news: **God had heard his prayer (verse 13). Some have concluded that Zechariah was praying for a son. However, two facts weigh against this idea. First, Zechariah and his wife were old and could no longer expect children. Second, as the priest representing the people, Zechariah would have been presenting the needs and petitions of the nation, not his own personal requests. As a result, many scholars conclude that Zechariah, like all of the godly people in Israel, would have been praying for the coming of the Messiah. This was the great hope and desire of the nation, that God would send the Promised One to His people.**

Discuss

? Describe a time when God answered a prayer of yours or that of someone you know. What was the prayer, and how did God's answer impact your life?

? What are some of the most common things we, as Christians, pray for today? To what extent do these common prayers reflect the priorities God calls us to have as believers?

John: Empowered by the Holy Spirit

Luke 1:13–17

[Luk 1:13-17 KJV] 13 But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. 14 And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. 15 For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. 16 And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord

their God. 17 And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

Say: The son promised to Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a special purpose. In a time when Israel was being oppressed by the Romans and even many Jewish religious leaders were living far from God's intended purpose for them, John would come into the world to point the way to the soon-coming Messiah. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Resource Packet Item 1: John Who?

To familiarize your students with John the Baptist and his role in God's salvation plan, hand out the information sheet "John Who?" As time allows, go over the material with your students and answer any questions they may have.

While God had answered Zechariah's prayer, He also provided an additional blessing: Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a son (Luke 1:13). Such a blessing was clearly a miracle from the Lord. God identified the child as a boy and instructed that the couple name him John. **The name John means "the Lord is gracious," or "shows grace." John's name was an indication that the time of God's grace was about to begin.** The angel also spoke in detail about John's character and the effect he would have on his family as well as on the nation (verses 14–17).

Among the things the angel revealed about John was the fact he would be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb (verse 15). This underscored the importance of the work God had planned for John the Baptist. God had a specific ministry in mind for John's life, and He empowered John for it at the very beginning of his life.

As we explore these verses, we gain a great lesson about preparation for ministry in this scene. **Just as John needed something more than human ability to do the work God had given him to do, so we need divine power to minister effectively today as well. Luke 24:49 illustrates this truth. The disciples had spent three years walking with Jesus and learning from Him. Yet before He sent them forth into the world, He instructed them to wait in Jerusalem until they received "power from heaven" (NLT). This refers to the baptism in the Holy Spirit, which they received later, after Christ's ascension, on the Day of Pentecost.**

Luke 1:16–17 further states that the work of John the Baptist would be a twofold work. First, sin and unbelief had separated many of the Jewish people from their God. **John, living a lifestyle of separation from the world around him, would remind the people of their need to turn back to God. Second, unbelief had come to permeate whole families, as people ignored the Word of the Lord. As a result, there was dwindling hope that the people would serve God in future generations. But John**

would help restore the people to a place of obedience, ready to receive the promised Messiah, according to what was taught by the former generations.

Resource Packet Item 2: The Nazirite Vow

Distribute the work sheet and divide your class into small groups. Assign one of the Scripture passages, with accompanying questions, to each group. Ask all of the groups to answer the application question at the bottom of the page. Then have the groups report on their findings, and discuss the application question.

The message of John's ministry still rings true today. We too must prepare our hearts for Christ's rule and daily submit to His rule. We need the Spirit's power in our lives to minister effectively and powerfully in a sinful world.

Discuss

? How does the Holy Spirit help us in ministry today?

? In what ways might we practice a lifestyle of separation amid our world?

Part 2—Zechariah's Reaction

Zechariah Expresses Disbelief

Luke 1:18–22

[Luk 1:18-22 KJV] 18 And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. 19 And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings. 20 And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season. 21 And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple. 22 And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless.

Say: God revealed astonishing news to Zechariah. Not only would he and his wife have a son in their old age, but that son would be a “man with the spirit and power of Elijah” who would “prepare the people for the coming of the Lord” (1:17, NLT). While all parents desire that their children would have a positive impact on the world, few would dream that their children would be called by God for such a role as John's. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Zechariah first reacted with disbelief to the angel's message (Luke 1:18). Moses reacted in a similar way. So did Abraham and Sarah. This can be attributed to his and Elizabeth's age at the time of the announcement—both were well beyond the normal age of procreation. Yet as a godly and pious Israelite—and a priest in the temple—Zechariah ought to have recalled some critically important events from Israel's past. No doubt, he knew well the story of Abraham and Sarah, and how **Sarah bore a child in her old age** (see Genesis 15:4; 17:5,15–17; 21:1). Similarly, **Rebekah was barren for twenty years before giving birth to Jacob and Esau** (Genesis 25:20–26). And **Rachel had been barren before giving birth to Joseph** (Genesis 30:22–24). **It is noteworthy that all three of these examples, and the children born from them, played significant roles in the furtherance of God's plan in sending His Son Jesus, the Messiah.**

These marvelous miracles—gifts from God—foreshadowed an important truth that Christ himself would teach. Zechariah needed to realize the truth later shared by Jesus in Matthew 19:26, **“With God everything is possible”** (NLT). The God we serve has performed miracles to further His plan from the very beginning. Even so, **Zechariah struggled with a sense of disbelief at what was told to him. As a result, the angel Gabriel took away Zechariah's ability to speak (Luke 1:19–22). This lasted until the naming of the baby after he was born (verses 62–64). Yet even though Zechariah could not speak, those who were at the temple quickly identified that something amazing had happened to him. They concluded that he must have seen a vision from the Lord. Truly, this was no ordinary day.**

Zechariah's loss of speech would serve two purposes. **First, it was a penalty for his lack of belief in response to Gabriel's message. Second, it would serve to confirm the truth of what Gabriel had said. If the angel could silence Zechariah for a period of time that would extend for months, then restore that speech, clearly the word of Gabriel was true. The baby he promised, John, would indeed be born.**

Discuss

? Why do you think that even a man like Zechariah would struggle to believe the message from Gabriel?

? What might we learn from Zechariah's example?

? What do you think is the significance, if any, of the many examples of God providing a child for a barren woman during the working out of His plan for the coming of the Messiah?

The Lord Is Kind

Luke 1:23–25

[Luk 1:23-25 KJV] 23 And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house. 24

And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying, 25 Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on [me], to take away my reproach among men. ...

Say: Imagine the joy Elizabeth felt each time her child moved within her. Being well past the expected age of childbearing, she had, no doubt, given up hope of ever becoming a mother. Yet through the grace and kindness of God, her dreams were being fulfilled far beyond anything she could have dared to hope. Often, God's answers to our prayers are "infinitely more than we might ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20, NLT). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

After his time of service in the temple came to an end and Zechariah had returned home, Elizabeth became pregnant, just as the angel had told him (verses 23–24), and she responded with gratitude (verse 25).

Elizabeth found great joy in being a part of what God was doing among His people, and her joy was especially personal in that He was working through her. God had enabled this woman who was past the age of childbearing to become pregnant. **In Bible times, a wife felt great sadness and a sense of disgrace when she was childless, and God had delivered her from this. Furthermore, God had a marvelous plan for her son, and He even empowered him before he was born. Gabriel's words reveal the providence of God. He had exercised control over minute details of John's life, and Elizabeth was a part of what He was doing.**

The great detail found in Luke concerning the birth of John underscores the importance of the role John would play in salvation history. Keep in mind the purpose of John's birth. **According to verse 17, John came to prepare the Jewish people for the coming of Christ. He labored for the lofty goal of pointing hearts toward the Savior of the world. John played a crucial role in it. God exercised His sovereign power so John could take his place in the history of salvation.**

Discuss

? Describe a time when God has been unexpectedly kind to you.

? What are some situations today that leave people feeling disgraced, and how can Christians minister love to such people?

Part 3—John's Birth

John's Arrival

Luke 1:57–68

[Luk 1:57-68 KJV] 57 Now Elisabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son. 58 And her neighbours and her cousins heard how the Lord had shewed great mercy upon her;

and they rejoiced with her. 59 And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father. 60 And his mother answered and said, Not [so]; but he shall be called John. 61 And they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name. 62 And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called. 63 And he asked for a writing table, and wrote, saying, His name is John. And they marvelled all. 64 And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue [loosed], and he spake, and praised God. 65 And fear came on all that dwelt round about them: and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judaea. 66 And all they that heard [them] laid [them] up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be! And the hand of the Lord was with him. 67 And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying, 68 Blessed [be] the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people,

Say: The birth of a child is always a source of joy, but this was no ordinary birth: John's parents were past the age for childbearing, the child's birth and his name had been announced by an angel, and Zechariah was unable to speak until he obeyed the angel's instructions. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

John was born, just as the angel had foretold, and a time of great celebration ensued (Luke 1:57–63). **According to the Law, Zechariah and Elizabeth brought their son to be circumcised on the eighth day, at which point it was customary that the child's name would be announced. While the family assumed they would name him after his father, Zechariah, Elizabeth announced that the child would be named John, as the angel had instructed (see Luke 1:13). As noted earlier, John's name means "the Lord is gracious," a name with twofold significance. It represented the answer to their prayers for a son. And it also announced that God's grace was about to be poured out upon His people, and ultimately upon the world. John would be the forerunner of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.**

Note that confused family members turned to Zechariah for an explanation as to what the child should be named. (John was not a name used in that family.) Zechariah had been unable to speak since the angel had visited him. (This loss of speech came as a result of his doubt about the angel's message.) So, John confirmed the name in written form (verses 62–63).

The moment Zechariah wrote the child's name, his speech was restored in response to his obedience. The praise Zechariah offered in that moment underscored the glory of the event.

The news of this miracle spread quickly (verses 65–66). Multitudes of people in the area reflected on the seriousness and significance of what had happened and wondered what it all meant.

Obedience is still, and will always be, a central part of our walk with God. When we step out in obedience to God and call upon Him to work in our circumstances, His power and His grace will be evident to those around us. Even those who are merely observers are often awed by God as He works.

Resource Packet Item 3: What's in a Name?

Distribute the worksheet and divide your class into small groups to complete it and discuss the questions.

Discuss

? In what ways can obedience to God serve as a testimony to others today?

? What are some other examples of how the name of person in the Bible reflected God's plan in that person's life, or in the world?

John's Call

Luke 1:76–80

[Luk 1:69-80 KJV] 69 And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; 70 As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began: 71 That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; 72 To perform the mercy [promised] to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; 73 The oath which he sware to our father Abraham, 74 That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, 75 In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life. **76 And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; 77 To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, 78 Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, 79 To give light to them that sit in darkness and [in] the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. 80 And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel.**

Say: Most parents look at their newborn child with a sense of hope for that child's future, and as Christian parents, we dedicate our children to God. Zechariah had a special insight as he looked at his son, and the blessing he pronounced was prophetic. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

In Luke 1:76–79, Zechariah delivered a word of blessing over John, but this was no ordinary parental blessing. **Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke a prophetic message over his son (see verse 1:67). Zechariah prophesied that John would be the forerunner of the Messiah, telling of the salvation of God through forgiveness of sin. John would proclaim God's mercy, personified in His Son, the Messiah (verses 76–79).**

And so, over the years to come, John grew physically as well as in spirit (verse 80). **His life would be spent in harsh and barren lands, eliminating distractions and providing an ideal place for him to prepare for his crucial ministry.**

Discuss

? How do you proclaim the message of Christ to those around you?

? In what ways might God have prepared you for the ministry or service He has called you to do?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: A new era began when God sent His Son Jesus to be the Savior of the world. After centuries of preparation and prophecies, God sent a forerunner, a man named John, to prepare the way for the Messiah. While we may not have had a dramatic call from birth as John did, God has called each of us to follow Him and to point the way to salvation through Jesus.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Find a tangible way to serve someone, pointing them to Christ.
- Examine your life, asking yourself if you are being obedient to God.
- Look for ways you can represent Christ in your job and other activities.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

The Light Shines in Darkness.
Isaiah 9:1–3

[Isa 9:1-3 KJV] 1 Nevertheless the dimness [shall] not [be] such as [was] in her vexation, when at the first he lightly afflicted the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward did more grievously afflict [her by] the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, in Galilee of the nations. 2 The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. 3 Thou hast multiplied the nation, [and] not increased

the joy: they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, [and] as [men] rejoice when they divide the spoil.

Tuesday:

A Voice in the Wilderness.
Isaiah 40:1–5

[Isa 40:1-5 KJV] 1 Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. 2 Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins. 3 The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: 5 And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see [it] together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken [it].

Wednesday:

Hearts of the Fathers.
Malachi 4:1–6

[Mal 4:1-6 KJV] 1 For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. 2 But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. 3 And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do [this], saith the LORD of hosts. 4 Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, [with] the statutes and judgments. 5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: 6 And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

Thursday:

The Holy Spirit and Fire.
Luke 3:15–18

[Luk 3:15-18 KJV] 15 And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not; 16 John answered, saying unto [them] all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire: 17 Whose fan [is] in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable. 18 And many other things in his exhortation preached he unto the people.

Friday:

The Kingdom of God Advances.

Matthew 11:7–15

[Mat 11:7-15 KJV] 7 And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? 8 But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft [clothing] are in kings' houses. 9 But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. 10 For this is [he], of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. 11 Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12 And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. 13 For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. 14 And if ye will receive [it], this is Elias, which was for to come. 15 He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

Saturday:

The Mystery of Ministerial Authority.

Mark 11:27–33

[Mar 11:27-33 KJV] 27 And they come again to Jerusalem: and as he was walking in the temple, there come to him the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders, 28 And say unto him, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority to do these things? 29 And Jesus answered and said unto them, I will also ask of you one question, and answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. 30 The baptism of John, was [it] from heaven, or of men? answer me. 31 And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say, Why then did ye not believe him? 32 But if we shall say, Of men; they feared the people: for all [men] counted John, that he was a prophet indeed. 33 And they answered and said unto Jesus, We cannot tell. And Jesus answering saith unto them, Neither do I tell you by what authority I do these things.