

## **Zechariah and Simeon**

There are two older men that feature prominently in the story of the birth of God's Messiah. Their names are Zechariah and Simeon. Both are given prophetic messages from the Lord concerning the significance of Jesus' birth and these messages still speak today.

Zechariah's main role in the story is that he is the father of John the Baptist, a cousin of Jesus. He wasn't expecting to have that important a role; it's likely that he'd given up hope of having any children at all. He and his wife were getting up there in years, certainly past the age when they could reasonably expect to have children. I once heard a Bible teacher explaining Zechariah's thought process when the angel Gabriel told him that God had heard his prayer and that Elizabeth, his wife, would bear him a son. He said, "That's a very old prayer."

The whole announcement was such a shock to Zechariah that he couldn't believe the message. Yes, it was great news and yes it was being delivered to him by an angel from God, but he had given up hope and it was hard to get it back again. And so Gabriel tells him that, because he didn't believe the message, he will be unable to speak until his child is born. Zechariah leaves the holy place where he was ministering to the LORD and where the angel spoke to him, and can only make signs to communicate to those gathered outside. He was silent for the next 9+ months until his baby boy was born and he wrote on a tablet: "His name is John", according to Gabriel's instruction. And immediately he began to speak and his speaking was praise to his God. Now, I want to read what Gabriel said, then what Zechariah prophesied.

*"Don't be afraid, Zechariah! For God has heard your prayer, and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son! And you are to name him John. You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice with you at his birth, for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or hard liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. And he will persuade many Israelites to turn to the Lord their God. He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah, the prophet of old. He will precede the coming of the Lord, preparing the people for his arrival. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will change disobedient minds to accept godly wisdom."*

(Luke 1:13-17)

Now, Zechariah's prophecy:

*Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has visited His people and redeemed them. He has sent us a mighty Saviour from the royal line of His servant David, just as He promised through His holy prophets long ago. Now we will be saved from our enemies and from all who hate us. He has been merciful to our ancestors by remembering His sacred covenant with them, the covenant He gave to our ancestor Abraham. We have been rescued from our enemies, so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness forever.*

*And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High because you will prepare the way for the Lord. You will tell His people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins. Because of God's tender mercy, the light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace. (Luke 1:68-79)*

The angel Gabriel who, in his own words, stands in the presence of God and was sent by God with this good news for Zechariah and for all of Judah, had some amazing things to say about the child who was to be born to Elizabeth.

1. He would be great in the eyes of the Lord. That's one you want to put in your baby book. Parents want to be proud of their children, for any number of reasons, and here's the promise that makes a believer proud: your child will be great in the eyes of the Lord. A child who has the favour of God on their lives is one who will be an influencer of men and women, who will have an impact on the world of the day.
2. The second big piece of news is that baby John would be filled with the Holy Spirit before he is born. This verse, forbidding alcohol for John and promising the gift of the Spirit reminds me of the verse in Ephesians where Paul tells us not to be drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit and allow him to control us (5:18). The emphasis is on just how special John will be - this is a unique occurrence to have a child not even born yet being filled with the Spirit.
3. John will have a significant spiritual role in turning the nation back to their God. Gabriel says that he will persuade many Israelites to turn to the Lord their God and that he will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah, who was such an important figure in the life of ancient Israel during the time of the kings Ahab and Jehoshaphat. Clearly, John will have a huge influence on the fate of the people of Judah, on the future course that their nation will take. He is a difference-maker.
4. His role will be to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. This would, I'm sure, have been understood as the coming of Messiah. The prophets had spoken of the coming of the Lord in terms that would have inspired hope for a spiritual revival in the land and the angel reinforces that hope with this prophecy. John would have a role in bringing people back to God and in so doing would prepare the way for the arrival of the Messiah. So these two are closely connected.
5. The last things Gabriel communicates to Zechariah are more specific and require some reflection. "He (meaning John) will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will change disobedient minds to accept godly wisdom." This relates back to the final words of the Old Testament, from the prophet Malachi:  
*Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the LORD arrives. His preaching will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents. Otherwise I will come and strike the land with a curse. (Mal. 4:5,6)*

Judea was badly divided. They had lost their national independence because they couldn't get along and one faction had invited the Roman general Pompey in to settle their arguments. They were still divided under Rome; they had a wide variety of responses to the Roman occupation and were in camps as diverse as Essenes and Zealots, Pharisees and Sadducees. These divisions were part of the national

framework of Judaism and would have affected families. It seems obvious that this passage should be understood as describing a mending of wounds between the generations, but there is also another way of interpreting Malachi's prophecy. The word "to" can also be translated "with" and so could be describing John's ministry as turning hearts of parents and their children towards the Lord, to pursuing His ways together and so preparing for His arrival. This interpretation blends well with the idea that follows - that John would change disobedient minds to accept godly wisdom. In other words, part of his ministry would be to confront the rebellion that takes hold in our selfish thoughts and to produce, instead, a humility that can accept wisdom from God.

So, as I pointed out earlier, Zechariah had at least nine months to think over what the angel Gabriel had told him about his son. What has he concluded? What will he say when he is given back the ability to speak? Let's see:

1. He jumps right to the purpose of John's coming and speaks about it as if it was already done. "Praise the Lord ... because He has visited His people and redeemed them. He has sent us a mighty Saviour from the royal line of His servant David, just as He promised through His holy prophets long ago." Note that Jesus hadn't been born yet, that Joseph and Mary were still up in the village of Nazareth. But Zechariah is so confident of God's word to him ... and His word to Mary ... that He speaks as if it was already accomplished. And the thing he is confident about is that God's time of salvation has come.
2. The second thing to note is that Zechariah is focused on God's deliverance for His people from their enemies. "Now we will be saved from our enemies", he says and continues on, thanking God for remembering His covenant of old. What he looks forward to is the freedom to worship, to serve God without fear, to live righteously, to live the way God intended. This is the fruit, the best fruit, of God's salvation. So, this first two thirds of Zechariah's prophecy has to do, not with the birth of his own son, but with the promised birth of Messiah.
3. Then, at the end, he proudly addresses his new-born baby boy. "And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High because you will prepare the way for the Lord." From the very beginning of his life, John will know that he's not the big fish in the sea, that his role is not the end game, but that he is preparing the way for some-one else, someone greater. The most glamorous job is not going out in front and calling, "Make way, make way", but that, in essence, was what John was called to do. He would tell people that someone was coming after him whose sandals he wasn't worthy to untie, that he, John, baptized with water, but the coming one would baptize in the Holy Spirit.
4. And the last big message from Zechariah's prophecy was that John would grow up to be a messenger of salvation, that he would tell God's people how their sins could be forgiven. As it turned out, that would be through pointing them to Jesus.

Notice the common ground between the angel Gabriel's prophecy and Zechariah's: John would prepare the way for the Lord to come and would do so by turning people's hearts, both towards God and towards one another. The great turning point in human history would not be accomplished by some military conquest or by some

technological advance or some political persuasion, but by a change of heart. That's always been the biggest need and it is again today. We as a society need a heart change, a turning towards God and towards one another.

Now we're going to switch to another elderly gentle-man, Simeon, who Luke describes as being righteous and very devout and eagerly expecting the coming of Messiah to rescue Israel. One day, the Holy Spirit gave Simeon a nudge and said, "Go to the Temple today", and Simeon obeyed. That was the day that Joseph and Mary went to the temple to present the baby Jesus to the Lord, as was required by Jewish law. And Simeon intercepted them as they crossed the temple courtyard, took the baby in his arms and began to praise God:

*Lord, now I can die in peace! As You promised me, I have seen the Saviour You have given to all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations and He is the glory of Your people Israel!*

Then Simeon turned to Mary and said:

*This child will be rejected by many in Israel, and it will be their undoing. But He will be the greatest joy to many others. Thus the deepest thoughts of many will be revealed and a sword will pierce your very soul. (Luke 2:29-35)*

Months after John was born and Zechariah received his voice back, giving prophecies about both Jesus and John, Jesus has now been born, in Bethlehem of Judea. And just over a week after his birth he was taken to the temple in Jerusalem to be dedicated. Simeon's prophecy starts like the earlier ones, showing gratitude for the promise of salvation that is represented by this baby he is holding. But there is an important difference, especially from Zechariah's prophecy. Zechariah had glorified God for saving His people from their enemies and from all who hate them. He spoke of God redeeming His people and sending a Saviour from the line of David. Simeon speaks of a much broader circle of redemption: "I have seen the Saviour You have given to ALL people; He is a light to reveal God to the nations!" Simeon's prophetic vision is wider and fuller than that of Zechariah; he sees Jesus' mission to all nations rather than just one nation.

And then he speaks directly to Mary about her son. "This child will be rejected by many in Israel, and it will be their undoing." Decisions will be made about her son, life and death decisions. Jesus will be the pivot point for many lives, maybe even the nation. Those who choose for Him will find their greatest joy in Him and those who choose against Him will be undone. In the process, the deepest thoughts of human beings will be brought out into the light. This is world-shaking news. Jesus' life will call people for a response and that response will clearly show what's truly in their hearts. And then the somber warning: "And a sword will pierce your very soul." Somehow, Jesus' life will bring great pain to his mother. There are times when prophetic words are not given to help you figure out what's going to happen next, but to help you know that God knew about what was going to happen and that He cared enough about you to prepare you, even if just a little bit, for the hard times that lie ahead. He did that for Mary, through Simeon.

In fact, when you look over the whole of Simeon's prophecy, you see a light and a dark side. The light is the good news that God's Saviour of the world has arrived and that He is for everyone, for all people! The dark is that this Saviour will be rejected, by many, and that this rejection will bring calamity to their lives, their deepest thoughts will be brought out into the open and it won't be pretty. The light is so good that you could easily become excited for the change that you sense could be coming. The dark is so desolate that you fear for those who reject the goodness of God when they come face to face with it.

So, let's take a few moments and ask what these prophetic words, spoken in the months before and the days after Jesus' birth might mean for us, living some 2023 or 4 years later. Here are some things to think about:

1. I'm struck with how so many characters in the Bible are content to see only part of the picture. Zechariah won't live to see his son John's ministry at the Jordan River. Simeon won't get to see the baby Jesus grow up and do miracles and teach people what God is like. But neither of these men, nor all the heroes of faith listed in Hebrews 11, are frustrated with seeing only their part of the journey. Zechariah is delighted that salvation has come to his people, even though he won't actually witness it - he believes in this promise so strongly that it's as if he has seen it come to pass. And Simeon's first reaction is, "Lord, now I can die in peace! As You promised me, I have seen the Saviour You have given to all people." And he's content with that. Too often we're anxious about a future we don't see fully resolved - but that doesn't come until the end. The lesson here for us is to live with a full and vibrant faith, even though we can't see it all working out. We still can live as if we can see the end - because we know it's in His hands.
2. Another thing that impacts me in these passages is the difference the Holy Spirit makes in the life of any individual. Zechariah is filled with the Spirit as soon as he obeys the angel's command and names his son John. Then he bursts out in declaring the praises of God for His works of salvation on behalf of His people. Simeon, it seems, was filled with the Spirit all the time. And look at what that produced in his life: confidence in God's promises, direction for his daily walk, insight into what God was doing in moving the history of Israel. The Spirit is alive in these pages of Luke's Gospel, preparing us for the great outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2. We can learn from these two men to become more fully reliant on the Spirit's leading in our own lives. We can learn to wait for His voice and to live with expectant hope and confident faith.
3. The third thing I want to point out from these passages which I think can be an encouragement to us, is the blessing that comes from faith. I think of Elizabeth's words to Mary: "You are blessed, because you believed that the Lord would do what He said." (1:45) Zechariah had to bear the weight of not being able to speak for a long time because he didn't believe, but then broke out in joyous praise because, ultimately, he did believe and saw God fulfill His promise. Simeon seems to have lived with joy all his life and he expresses it so powerfully in the few words we know from his prophecy. Let's be a people who trust our God, who lean into His faithfulness, and who experience His blessings.