



The unfolding of your words gives light.

To Seek and to Save

An Exposition of the Gospel of Luke

¹³But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard^a, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John^b. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth^c. ¹⁵For he will be great in the sight of the Lord^d; and he will drink no wine or liquor^e, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother’s womb^f. ¹⁶And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God^g. ¹⁷It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah^h, TO TURN THE HEARTS

^a 1:13 **Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard.** Zacharias may have been nervous as he approached the altar of incense, memories of Nadab and Abihu, the rebellion of Korah and a proud King Uzziah suffering judgment. Then an angel appeared. Had he messed up this once-in-a-lifetime task? To shake Zacharias out of his terror, the angel communicated the purpose of his visit.

^b 1:13 **Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.** The angel did not come to take something away from Zacharias but to announce a gift. John (*Yochanan*) means “the Lord is gracious.”

^c 1:14 **You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.** Notice the pleasure the birth of John would bring (“joy,” “gladness,” “rejoice”). Blessings are sweeter when you have been made to wait for them. He was to bring the same kind of joy that Isaac brought to Abraham and Sarah.

^d 1:15 **he will be great in the sight of the Lord.** Compare John the Baptist to Herod. One was given the title “Great” by men and the other by God. John’s greatness was to be greatness in God’s sight, like that of his parents (1:6). As the Master later testified:

Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. Matthew 11:11

^e 1:15 **he will drink no wine or liquor.** This is not a biblical indication that great people are Teetotalers but that John himself would be subject to a vow of abstinence from intoxicating beverages. He may have been a Nazirite like Samson and Samuel.

^f 1:15 **he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother’s womb.** The filling ministry of the Holy Spirit is mentioned all through the Scriptures (Exodus 31:3; 35:31; Luke 1:67; Acts 2:4, 14-41; Acts 4:8-13, 31; Ephesians 5:18-19). The thought of an unborn baby experiencing this work takes us out of the normal use of the term. The Bible commands believers to be filled with the Spirit. We assume infants cannot make conscious choices before a certain age. Because this is a major exception to the norm, ours is not to try and force some hidden meaning on the text. Ours is to simply believe it. Ours is to bless the Lord for His ability to do a mighty work even while a child is still in his mother’s womb (see the life-affirming event in Luke 1:44).

^g 1:16 **he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.** John’s message did not give people hope that they might stay the same and get happy. Negatively he called them to flee the coming wrath, but the positive message pointed to the only refuge from wrath.

^h 1:17 **It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah.**

Forerunner before Whom? The Lord their God. This is a testimony to the deity of Christ. It is also a testimony that, while John was not Elijah (he denied that in John 1:21), his ministry would resemble that of Elijah. Like Elijah confronted Ahab and Jezebel, John would confront Herod Antipas and Herodias. Elijah called the people to repentance and so did John.

The Gospel of Luke
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OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN^a, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous^b, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord^c.^d

^a **1:17 TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN.** This is a quotation from the prophet Malachi that prophesied the coming of Elijah before “the great and terrible day of the Lord.” This is not a reference to fathers gaining a new affection for their kids. It is a reference to fathers taking ownership in teaching and leading their kids as the word of God commands (Deuteronomy 6).

Remember the law of Moses My servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel. Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse. Malachi 4:4-6

This is not about reincarnation. John himself did not think he was Elijah (John 1:21). The Lord Jesus later spoke of John the Baptist when He told Peter, James and John (who had just seen the historic Elijah and Moses):

For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Matthew 11:13-15

Elijah is coming and will restore all things; but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands. Matthew 17:11-12

^b **1:17 the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous.** What is the “attitude of the righteous”? Some translations use the word “wisdom” here, but that does not properly convey the meaning of the word. The angel was talking about someone who would make people think biblically. Mark (8:33) records the verb form of this word coming from Jesus’ mouth when He rebuked Peter for not “setting his mind” on God’s interests.

^c **1:17 so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.** To “make ready” is like preparing a meal, but the second word “prepared” is a construction term. It is used of Noah building the ark. It is elsewhere used of John preparing the way of the Lord. So then the preparation required was not first an outward behavior but a complete restructuring of the inward attitude. Those who are disobedient are more than outward rascals. They have a resident monster and are “unprepared.”

^d **1:13-17 We are wired for glory.** You see that right away in human history when, in the garden of Eden, Adam caught his first glimpse of the sweet product of his surgery. He became a poet.

But glory-chasing goes in both directions. You also see it when Adam and his bride chased after the promise of a greater joy outside God’s boundaries. The desire for pleasure was not the problem.

C. S. Lewis said in a sermon entitled “The Weight of Glory”:

Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

John Piper put it this way:

The great hindrance to worship is not that we are pleasure seeking people, not at all, but that we are willing to settle for such pitiful pleasures. We have settled for a home, a family, a few friends, a job, a television, a microwave oven, an occasional night out, a yearly vacation, a new laptop computer. We have accustomed ourselves to such meager, short lived pleasures that our capacity for joy has shriveled and therefore our capacity for true worship has shriveled.

This superior joy is something Zacharias and Elizabeth were just stepping into as this text unfolds. Their joy was not about getting new stuff or having their senses tickled in the short-term.

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What is driving people? Joy. Because we are wired for delight, it is important that we find our delight in proper places. I believe, then, that it is possible to get as much joy—indeed *more* joy—out of gathering with the family of God for a time of worship as it sitting down to a great feast or basking in the joy of your team winning a championship. Consider why John was going to bring joy and what that has to do with you:

1. John was an answer to prayer. There is real joy in hearing from God.
2. John was a new life. There is real joy in bearing children.
3. John was going to live a life that pleased God. There is real joy in having a clean conscience.
4. John was going to call fathers back to their biblical roles. There is real joy in ordering a home after God's word.
5. John was going to call the people to repentance. There is real joy in being given the chance to rebuild what is broken.

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