

It's time. After the months of waiting, not telling anyone, but letting God's mercy show itself, and after her meeting with Mary, it's time for Elizabeth's baby to be born. Is Mary still there? The Bible doesn't say for certain, but we do know that she arrived in Elizabeth's sixth month and stayed for three months, so she is either still there or just left. If she stayed there that long, why would she leave?

Verse 58 tells us that her neighbors and her cousins (actually, relatives) heard how the Lord had showed great mercy upon her, and they rejoiced with her. The word here isn't actually "showed" great mercy, but it's "magnifies"; everyone heard that the Lord magnified his mercy upon her. She had already been shown mercy in that she was having a child in her old age. Now, he's magnifying His mercy. This is a Hebrew expression that we also find in Genesis 19:19, which is talking about Lot and his escape and says, "Behold now, thy servant hath found grace in thy sight, and thou hast magnified thy mercy, which thou hast shewed unto me in saving my life; and I cannot escape to the mountain, lest some evil take me, and I die." Even though Lot was short on faith, he still recognized the power and the mercy of the Lord.

The birth of a boy is always the cause of great rejoicing in many parts of the world, including the East. A son, especially a firstborn son, is the crown of the marriage relation. We always need to keep the importance of firstborn sons in our minds when studying Scripture. To the neighbors and family, the birth of this baby was magnified by the fact that his parents were old and had little, if any chance of having a child. Everyone was awed by the supernatural manifestations that accompanied his birth.

We know that the mercies of the Lord were magnified far beyond the simple earthly manifestation of having a child, even if he is the firstborn son. We know now, what Elizabeth and Zechariah knew then; their child was the earthly forerunner of the Messiah.

The last phrase in verse 58 says, "and they rejoiced with her". This doesn't convey the full meaning of the phrase. The word is in the imperfect tense. What this means is that it is continuous action, but it was going on in past time. This was continual joy by the neighbors and family; they didn't simply come in and say, "oh, that's nice", and then leave. They were continually joyful over this marvelous event!

[Verse 59] "And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child..." and actually, it says little infant boy, not simply child. The word used here is occasionally used as a term of endearment, but when used literally, as it is here, it's talking about an infant. The Scriptures make a strong distinction between babies, children, mature children, etc., and we should also. Even here, even though it seems inconsequential, we need to be in the habit of reading exactly what's there.

The eighth day after the birth of a boy was, and still is a great event to the Jews. Leviticus 12:2 tells us that the mother is unclean until then. On that day, the relatives get together to circumcise the infant according to law. (That's in Leviticus 12:3 and more

thoroughly in Genesis 17:12.) This was strictly observed even if the eighth day after birth was a Sabbath. (This is confirmed in John 7:23, which is after Jesus healed a man and was accused of breaking the Sabbath, and says, “If a man on the sabbath day receive circumcision, that the law of Moses should not be broken; are ye angry at me, because I have made a man every whit whole on the sabbath day?”) Then, after circumcising the baby, they give the child his name. Or, at least, that was tradition.

Read with me the end of verse 59: “...and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father.” Was that to be the child’s name? In the Jewish tradition, a child was named on the day of circumcision. Even the names of Abram and Sarai were changed on the occasion of the first practice of circumcision among the Jews. It was also the custom to choose the name from among his ancestors or relatives, and in this case, the relatives decided on the name of his father, “Zechariah”. “Zechariah”, if you remember, means, “Jehovah remembers” or “remembered by Jehovah”. This name is quite fitting for John’s father, but not at all suitable for him. In John, Jehovah favors Israel or is gracious toward them, and therefore, he is named “John”, which means “Jehovah is gracious”.

This word here that is simply translated as “called”, is what is known as conative imperfect. The imperfect tense, as we studied a few minutes ago, means that it was continuous action in the past. The word “conative” means that it’s a process or behavior that’s directed toward action including desire, impulse, and striving.

You may ask, “Why do we study words in Greek so much?” The Greek language is uniquely and perfectly suited to the communication of God's truth. It has modes of expression so concise and accurate in their descriptive power that it defies exact translation into English without becoming unwieldy. That's one reason we have so many New Testament translations: Scholars endeavor to carry over the full import of the Greek into English. So, when we carefully study the Bible, as we’re instructed to do, we try to fully understand the meaning of the Greek that stands behind our English versions.

In addition, it is helpful to know that the New Testament came to us in what is called Koine, or "common" Greek. It is not the language of the classics or the poets, but the common, ordinary language of everyday popular usage. Modern archeology has done much for the New Testament student by unearthing and clarifying Greek terms that might be otherwise obscure. In their finds, the archeologists have buried the destructive critics of the New Testament record under the piles of evidence gleaned from pottery shard, parchment, and papyrus. It is encouraging to know that archeology has confirmed, not denied, the accuracy of our New Testament text, which was written in a language the common people could grasp, and it’s very clear when looked at from this perspective.

So, verse 59, which says, “they called him Zechariah”, “called” is a conative imperfect verb. What does that mean? It means, “They tried to call”, “they wanted to call”, or perhaps, the best way to put it is, “They were calling him Zechariah”, and they weren’t consulting the parents.

[Verse 60] “Not so” is not quite as emphatic as the Greek makes it. Elizabeth said, “No! He will be called John.” Now, we’re not told how Elizabeth knew that his name would be John. Some people assume that it’s the same spiritual intuition that controlled her greeting of Mary. Personally, since Zechariah was the one spoken to by the angel, I see no reason why he simply couldn’t have written it down for her. We’ll see in a moment, down in verse 63 that that’s what he did for everyone else.

Now, we see in verse 61 & 62, that like most relatives, they obviously know more about every aspect of raising a child than the mother does. They want to call this little baby boy “Zechariah”, and the mother is obviously just being obstinate. In verse 61, they point out to her that none of her kindred are called by that name. She should know better! Tradition and relatives are obviously the way to go. Right, Zechariah?

When she was nixing their plans to call him what they wanted to call him, they asked the father. Now, in many situations, if a man knows what is good for him, he will go along with his wife, unless it’s a matter of morals or principles or something equally important. In this case, even the wife was outranked. In Luke 1:13, he had been commanded by the angel of the Lord (this was as good as the word coming directly from the mouth of God) to name this little baby John.

Zechariah asks for a writing tablet; this was probably a wax-covered tablet of some sort that could be used over and over. He’s still deaf and dumb at this point, so I’m sure he used signs, just as they used signs to ask him the question. [Why didn’t we think of a tablet?]

The Lord knows what names to give people, and Zechariah names him what God instructed him to. Verse 63 says, “and wrote, saying, His name is John”. The Bible tells us at the end of verse 63 that they all marveled. Here they were, arguing with Elizabeth about what the name of this baby should be, so they ask the deaf-mute father, and he gives them the same answer. There’s no telling what the relatives thought about this situation, other than marveling, just as people might think odd things about you when you do what God wants. They might think you’re nuts, they might think you’re a wimp; it doesn’t matter. Do what God tells you to do, and you cannot, under any circumstances, go wrong!

“And his mouth was opened immediately.” He didn’t simply open his mouth, it was opened for him. When was it opened? Immediately – A word that is used 19 times in the NT, 17 of those by Luke, and 13 of those times in connection with miracles of healing or infliction of disease or death. That’s what happened here. Upon completion of this miracle (this baby boy being born to aging parents), what happened? He was struck deaf and dumb until “these things shall be performed” (Luke 1:20), and naming him John was the last of “these things” to be performed. So, upon completion of all these things, his mouth was immediately opened, according to the sign he had been given.

“His mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed.” As an interesting side note here, there is no verb with tongue, and the verb “opened” that goes with mouth doesn’t

match the word “tongue”, either. This is what is called a zeugma or a syllepsis. It’s a sentence structure that uses one verb and two subjects that don’t match. Like, “He lost his coat and his temper”, or “he took my advice and my wallet”. It’s not really that important to the study here, but the tongue being loosed is what is obviously implied.

This man has been deaf and mute for nine months, carrying around the news of this great miracle. I don’t know about you, but I’d be bursting at the seams to tell someone. He probably was also, but could not. So, what do you think he did when his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed? What any of us would do. He talked. This verb is also in the imperfect tense, so just like us, he kept right on talking, and while he was talking, he was praising God! We need to do that a little more often when we’re talking. When he started talking, this was another miracle for those around him to observe. We can only assume that they would have been greatly affected by this miracle. Even if they thought the deaf-mute bit was an act, they could not deny the miracle of this baby boy being born to aging parents, and his mouth and tongue being opened only confirmed the supernatural aspect of this miracle. It was more than a mere accident.

[verse 65] Marvels spread quite quickly in a land like Israel, and especially then, as the time for the fulfillment of the prophecies drew near. This is not talking about terror, but about religious awe.

I like this expression, “noised abroad”. It’s a fancy way of saying “they talked about it a lot.” Once again, we find a verb in the imperfect tense. They kept on talking about this event, far and wide. Even without radio, TV, and the internet, the people all around the hill country heard about this. Now, there were a lot of priests in that area, so they would have been particularly interested, because the Scriptures contained many promises of future greatness, and they all converged on the coming Messiah. Most of these priests would be looking for the Messiah, and it was well known that Elijah would come as the forerunner of the Messiah to prepare His path. Malachi 4:5 tells us, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.” They were living in a day of expectation. Are we living in a day of expectation today? If you’re not, you should be. His return is near. Expect it.

[Verse 66] Everyone who hears about these things thinks about them in their heart. This is not just a brief, cursory event. They pondered long and hard, and they ask, “What will this little boy be?” They don’t ask “who”, they ask “what”. With all these supernatural events surrounding the birth of this baby boy, everyone could predict something wonderful happening. But, the question is, “What will this baby be?”

“And the hand of the Lord was with him.” Luke adds this to the supernatural events surrounding the birth, almost as a way of emphasizing that this is not just a coincidence. I’ve heard it explained that coincidence is when God chooses to remain anonymous, and He’s not remaining very anonymous here. This expression, “The hand of the Lord was with him”, is used by no one but Luke in the NT (both here and in Acts), but it is a common Hebrew expression that can be found in the OT.

[Verse 67] “And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost [Spirit], and prophesied.” Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Zechariah gave this benediction. It may be what is referred to in verse 64 in which he “began to speak, blessing God.” He was filled with the Holy Spirit, just as Mary had been previously, and he also caught the Messianic message in its highest meaning. Like a true priest, he leads his hearers’ hearts to worship Jehovah. That’s what he does first and foremost, just as we should. He begins with a tribute to the Messiah, yet unborn, who, though he shall follow John, was also before him. This absolutely shows the touch of the divine Spirit. Merely human knowledge and devotion, based on self, would have caused him to make this benediction in honor of his son, the greatest of all prophets. Yet, the moral greatness of John is most clearly revealed in the way that made the insistent claim, “I must be inferior”. Verses 68-79 is the benediction that he gave concerning these events. Almost every phrase can be found in the OT.

[Verse 68] “Hath visited”, or rather, “He visits”, is an old Greek word with a Hebraic coloring that means to look into with a view to help. We have plenty of examples of this verb in the sense of inspecting and examining, in this same sense.

“Hath visited and redeemed,” or “He visits with a view to help, and He redeems”. In the OT, God is often said to “visit” for judgment. In the NT, he “visits” for mercy. He visited in order to pay the price for our redemption. That price is one we could not pay for ourselves.

[Verse 69] “Horn of Salvation.” [Psalm 132] This is a common metaphor in the OT, and it represents strength, like the horn of bulls. [Psalm 132:17] [Psalm 18:2; Psalm 75:10]

[Verse 70] “...which have been since the world began.” “Who are from the age” literally; “Who are of old.”

[Verse 71] Like Israel, our enemies are many, and many hate us. The world hates us.

[Verse 72-73] [Genesis 22:16-18] We don’t know just how clearly Zechariah grasped the full impact of this covenant. Was he looking at just the earthly seed, or was he looking at the big picture and applying this to the heavenly seed? We’re not told specifically, but it’s my opinion that as a priest, he would have access to great knowledge, and being filled with the Holy Spirit, he would have the ability to discern the truth and apply that knowledge.

[Verse 74] “To be fearlessly offering divine service to him.” This word “serve” is a word that originally meant to “serve for hire”. “For the wages of sin is death”, but what are the wages of righteous service? Rewards and life for the age to come; that’s what we’ve been promised. Being saved is a free gift. We don’t give our divine and fearless service to obtain everlasting life, do we? We give our divine and fearless service because we’ve been given everlasting life. God has promised us grace to serve him successfully,

and has made us promises if tap into that grace to serve him acceptably. We want to hear, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant”, when we’re at the judgment seat.

[Verse 75] “All the days of our life”, or literally, all our days. “Holiness and righteousness”; that’s in interesting combination. It’s the Godward and the manward aspects of conduct. The word translated here as holiness, is a Greek word “*hosiotEs*”, which is from a word that refers to the eternal principles of right, not constituted by the laws or customs of men, but antedating them. Thus, this word “*hosiotEs*” is concerned primarily with the eternal laws of God. It is the “divine consecration and inner truth of righteousness”, according to Meyer. Throughout the NT, its look is toward God, and in no case is it used of moral excellence as related to men. The word translated “righteousness”, “*dikaios*”, has to do with the rule of conduct toward men (but it’s not limited to that). For another example of these words, turn with me to [Ephesians 4:24]. John is going to be righteous and holy, in the eyes of men and in the eyes of God. (But, as we find out later, men will hate him for it, just as righteous men today are often hated.)

[Verse 76] Here, we have the first mention of his child in this benediction; Zechariah, like Elizabeth, loses sight entirely of self in the glory of God. Up until this point, we see this father, despite knowing just how great his son will be, forgets that in order to celebrate his son’s Lord. Even here, he addresses his son directly, and tells him the forecast for his life (which he was given in Luke 1:13-17), which involves his service to the Lord. He doesn’t even call him “my child” here; his son belongs to God, and not only because he’s a firstborn, who would be consecrated to the ministry. Zechariah tells him that we will be going before the Messiah, to prepare the roads and get them ready for his journey.

Zechariah is no longer unbelieving, or lacking faith. He repeats the description of his son’s work that the angel gave him. That work is preparing the roads for the Messiah. It is the custom, in the East, to prepare the roads for the passage of a great ruler. His most trusted servant goes before him to see that it has been repaired and is not full of potholes. In this same manner, John was sent to prepare their hearts for the Messiah.

[Verse 77] This is the entire aim and the end work of the forerunner. He didn’t save anyone, he just taught them; he gave them knowledge. The Messiah is the power; he’s the horn of salvation.

[Verse 78] “Tender mercies”, it’s plural, or literally, “bowels or heart of mercies”, as we find in 1 Peter 3:8 and James 5:11.

“Whereby the dayspring from on high has visited us.” Literally, it says, “the rising from on high”. The word occurs in the LXX as a rendering of the word “branch”, as something “rising up or springing up”. [Zechariah 6:12] to see one of the Messiah’s names. [And you speak to him, saying, Thus speaks Yahweh of hosts, saying: Behold the man! Sprout is his name. And from under him shall it sprout. And he shall build the temple of Yahweh. CLV]

[Verse 79] This word that's translated as "dayspring", or "rising", can also be used for the rising of a heavenly body. [Isaiah 60:19; age-lasting, not everlasting] The Messiah is "the rising from on high"; he's the "sprout" or the "dayspring", but he's also compared to a heavenly body. [Verse 79] The light will enable those who sit in the dark and the shadow of death to see. Titus 2:11 tells us, "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men". Everyone can see the need to be saved and the way. They've been given that light.

But, it's also been given to guide our feet (no longer "they"; it's now first person, so is talking about those who are already saved) into the path of peace.

This word that is translated as "dayspring" can be used for either a sprout or a heavenly body. In this passage, I think it's referring to both uses. I think this passage is referring to both the earthly seed and the heavenly seed; there's an earthly kingdom and a heavenly kingdom.

The Messiah came to be a light unto the world. We need to let him not only light the way for us here on earth, but to light the way for us (to open our eyes) into the heavenly realms. We need the light so that we may serve him acceptably here on Earth, so that one day, we can hear, "well done", and we can rule and reign with him.