

Background Check on Jesus Christ • Luke 1:5-45

During spring break a few years ago some of our family took an interesting journey. Four of us traveled to Scotland and England — my mother, our son Jeff, my wife Charleen and I. We flew to Glasgow, then traveled to Edinburgh and its seaport of Leith. From there we traveled all around Scotland and then south to my mother’s native Lakes District in England. She was born in an area of northern England called Cumbria in the town of White Haven and grew to adulthood in Workington along the English coast of the Irish Sea.

We saw the house where my mother was born, walked through the schools she attended, saw her grandfather’s butcher shop. But the most memorable event was our visit to a cemetery. Her father died when my mother was a little girl. I think her memory of him is minimal. She had never visited his grave. After searching and asking, we finally found the old cemetery and the broken tombstone. As we all stood there by a grave that is now nearly a century old, there was an unexpected surge of emotion. It was a connection to history that I had known little about.

We have no control over our family histories. We did not choose our parents. None of us chose the time or place of birth. Yet, all of this background is part of who we are. It is an essential part of our biographies whether we know the details or not.

The same is true of Jesus Christ. That is why this physician-turned-historian named Luke begins the first chapter of Jesus’ biography telling about the year with two special births in the same extended family. Both births were boys. They were cousins named John and Jesus. The year they were born has become a baseline to our calendars.

Jesus’ family of origin included some elderly relatives of his young mother Mary. Their names were Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah was a direct descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses, who 1500 years earlier had been chosen by God to be the high priest of Israel. Only Aaron’s direct descendants were allowed to serve as priests in the Temple of the Jews in Jerusalem. Zechariah was a direct descendant and therefore a priest of Israel.

As a priest Zechariah was limited in whom he could marry. Priests were allowed only to marry women with 100 percent Jewish heritage. Marriage to a divorcee was strictly forbidden. The best of all possible scenarios was for a young man to marry a virgin who was also a descendant of Aaron. That was about as good as you could get and that was Elizabeth. She was, by society’s standards and by their religious standards, the best possible choice.

By the first century, the number of priests had grown far beyond the job openings. There were twenty-four different sections of priests with a total of around 20,000 all together. Zechariah belonged to the division of Abijah.

Because there were so many priests there were only a few times during the year when all the priests were called to serve. Those times were at Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles. The rest of the time they worked in other jobs.

Luke’s research on Zechariah and Elizabeth shows that they were very good and godly people. According to Luke 1:6, “Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.” Yet, the great desire of their hearts remained unfulfilled.

Luke 1:7 tells us, “They had no children, because Elizabeth was barren.”

They lived at a time when childlessness was considered to be a great tragedy, some considered it to be a curse from God. Some rabbis taught that a childless Jew should be excommuni-

cated from Israel. One of the legal grounds for divorce was the failure of a wife to bear a child for her husband.

As good as their lives were, they could not have the one thing they wanted most of all, a baby. I imagine that they prayed ten thousand times for Elizabeth to become pregnant, but God never said yes. Until, as the years melted into decades, the young couple became old and the childbearing years were passed.

Zechariah and Elizabeth must have asked God why. Hadn’t they been good enough? Didn’t they do all they were supposed to do? Why were they being punished when they hadn’t done anything

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wrong? Didn't God care? Why would God give children to couples who were far less capable parents?

All of these are very good questions. They are the same questions that good and godly men and women struggling with infertility still ask today. If it is not a prayer for a pregnancy then it may be a prayer for a husband or for a wife, for a job or for a friend, for a cure from a terrible disease or release from relentless pain. Sometimes God gives answers to such prayers. Sometimes the answer is no. Sometimes it is as if God does not even hear the prayer.

What is so very special about Zechariah and Elizabeth is that they did not love or serve God any less even when their prayers were not answered. They loved and lived for God himself and not for the gifts he gave or withheld.

One day when Zechariah's division was on duty in the Temple, they drew lots to see who would burn incense to God. This was a very special privilege accorded to any priest only once in his lifetime. Many priests served their entire lives and never once were chosen to go into the inner part of the Temple and represent the nation in offering incense for worship to the Lord.

By now Zechariah was an old man, but on this day he was chosen. Thousands of people waited in the outer "Court of the Israelites" to see and smell the incense and then have the assigned priest come out and pronounce his blessing on them. Zechariah's heart must have pounded with excitement. His hands probably shook with nervousness. His soul was filled with awe. He had never been so close to God before. He had never felt more like a priest than he did at that moment.

As Zechariah burned the incense, the angel of God appeared to him and nearly scared him to death. Luke 1:12 says, "... he was startled and was gripped with fear." The angel was Gabriel and this is his first recorded appearance in more than six hundred years. The last time the Bible records that he left the presence of God in heaven was in the time of Daniel. Now he had been sent to tell Zechariah not to be afraid and to assure him that his prayers would be answered.

But what prayers would that be? It seems that Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up praying for a baby because they were too old. And it seems rather unlikely that at the peak moment of his priesthood, leading the nation in worship, that he was praying for a baby.

Maybe there is a lesson here for us. God had

not forgotten Zechariah's prayers for a child. And, God was listening to Zechariah's prayer of worship. When Zechariah's soul was most filled with God was when God answered Zechariah's most personal prayer.

Gabriel predicted that he and Elizabeth would have a son. They were to name the child John. He would be a joy and a delight to his parents as well as a delight to the heart of God. John would be everything godly parents could ever hope a son to be. He would be a prophet in the tradition of Elijah who would bring people to God, reconcile families and prepare the way for the Messiah. God was prepared to honor this godly couple who had so much honored God!

But Zechariah had his doubts. He was something of a skeptic. So he asked the angel in Luke 1:18, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

I don't know a great deal about the psychology of angels, but I suspect that Gabriel may have been a little irritated by this. He answered with a tone in his voice that said, "Do you have any idea to whom you are talking?" He went on to say in Luke 1:19-20, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

When Zechariah stepped into public view the crowd immediately sensed that he had had a supernatural experience. He radiated his supernatural experience. And when he could not speak, they were all the more convinced.

It was not long after that that Elizabeth became pregnant in her older age. She said in Luke 1:25, "The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

So what does all this have to do with Jesus? Why is this the introduction to the biography of Jesus Christ? It is because God does not work in individual lives in isolation. God works through families. God connects relationships. God used godly parents to produce a special son who would prepare people for the coming of Jesus.

God had a plan. God always has a plan. All the pieces fit together. While it was impossible to see what was happening from the beginning, it became obvious later on. And is it not exactly the same for us? God is the master of bringing together seem-

ingly unanswered prayers, great disappointments and apparent tragedies into a perfect masterpiece that we could never have imagined in advance. What God wants from us is faith that trusts him to make his eternal masterpiece out of pieces we thought could never fit together into anything good.

But then Gabriel received his next assignment. The closest angel to God had been waiting six centuries between assignments and now he had two in the same year. This would be the grandest message the magnificent angel would ever deliver. He was to announce the miraculous conception and birth of the Messiah, God's Son, the Savior of humankind.

I wonder if he thought he had been sent to the wrong person. This was a poor teenage virgin girl in the obscure village of Bethlehem. But probably Gabriel did not have a moment's doubt or hesitation. He was so experienced with God that he knew it was just like God to choose the unlikely, the obscure, the unimportant — in order to do something supernaturally great!

In that we may all find comfort and hope. God is not impressed with money or power or fame. God delights in young girls and ordinary people and folks no one else has ever heard of. These are the ones — we are the ones! — God delights to use most of all.

Gabriel's words were direct and profound. He said to Mary:

Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.

Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great

and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.

This was the answer to every young Jewish woman's prayers. To be the mother of the Messiah! The angel announced that God had chosen Mary out of all the potential mothers of the world. She was specially favored by God to give birth to His Son! He would be the king of Israel, the Savior of the world, the King of all kings.

Mary was scared. She was troubled. She had no category to understand. She had to say some-

thing, and with simple and meek words she asked the most practical of questions: "How will this be since I am a virgin?"

You see, she assumed what a lot of us assume. She assumed that God always works through the usual ways, through the natural means. It was a fair assumption for her to make because that's usually what God does. But when God needs to do what is otherwise impossible, God does the supernatural.

The angel answered her and said, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

We are never told the physiology of what was to happen. I doubt we would understand it if we were told. God has drawn a veil of privacy around the miracle of the virgin conception. Somehow the Holy Spirit performed a one-of-a-kind miracle as the egg of a young Jewish girl was supernaturally fertilized by the Spirit of God. And at that moment of conception the Son of God became human for the first time and forever. The Creator, Lord and Master of the universe was contained in a human embryo. He who is called the Light of the World lived in nine months of complete darkness. He who spoke the world into existence was for 36 weeks silent.

How did Luke know these secrets? Remember that he was both a physician and an historian. He was a researcher and an inter-

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viewer. He must have interviewed Mary. She must have told him what was said, that she was troubled and about the intimate and supernatural transaction that had taken place within her body.

When Christians recite the Apostles' Creed, we say that we believe that Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. Do you believe that? Do you really believe that Mary was still a virgin the day Jesus was born and that his conception was a miracle of God? If you do, then you can and should believe everything else in the biography of Jesus Christ. He was supernatural from the very beginning.

Amazingly, the angel Gabriel took the story

back to Elizabeth. He wanted Mary to know that she was not alone. Elizabeth's was the lesser, more natural miracle. Mary's was the greater supernatural miracle. But it was all in the family. You see, God works in families. Rarely if ever do his miracles stand alone. Rather, he weaves his web of the supernatural through our families, our communities, our churches, our nations and our histories. God makes all of the pieces fit together.

Mary had two outward responses to all of this. First, she submitted to God's will. She said, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." That is a most uncommon prayer.

Her second response was that she went to see Elizabeth. She had to share her supernatural experience with someone else who could understand. She did what godly men and women have done for generations. She immediately connected with another person of faith.

So there you have it. The background leading up to the birth of Jesus Christ. It is a story of miracles, a story of God, a story of family. But it is our story, too. When we become Christians we are born into the family of God. We become eternally related to Jesus and John. Jesus' history becomes our history. His story becomes our story.

Sometimes we can clearly see the amazing way God works in our lives just as he worked supernaturally in the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary and John and Jesus. Other times it may seem as if God is terribly distant or has forgotten or is not involved at all.

I truly believe that someday we may page through the detailed history books of humanity kept

on the shelves of heaven's library. There we will find that God used every piece of our lives for good in the puzzle of history. It will all make sense. Even the disappointments, the silences, the unexpected and the troubling. God was there. He, the Master, was making a masterpiece out of our lives. And we may be stunned to find that the most jagged and broken and ugliest pieces of our stories actually fit in perfectly to make the masterpiece complete.

But until that day when we will see what we cannot now see and understand what we cannot now understand, may we pray the words of Mary — "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

Father, until that day, it is our prayer that we as Christians are the servants of God, and may it be to us just as you have said. Amen.

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