**BORN TO BRING MANY PEOPLE BACK TO THE LORD**

Luke 1:1-25 November 30, 2014 Key Verse 1:17

“And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous-to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

From this week we are going to study 5 lessons in Luke’s gospel related to Christmas message. Christmas is the time for us to deeply think about our Lord Jesus’ birth and learn newly what it means that Jesus came into this world. Today we will study about the birth of the forerunner of Christ Jesus; John the Baptist and what ministry he will serve and also his parent’s upright life before God. As we serve this generation as God’s servant, we want to pray that we may have the same spirit and power of John the Baptist and live upright life like his parents Zechariah and Elisabeth to be used by God in raising little John the Baptist.

**1. Zechariah and Elisabeth who were upright in the sight of God (1-13)**

Verses 1-4 tell about the purpose of the author Luke’s writing about Gospel book. In verse 4, Luke says, “so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. In verse 3, the receiver “Theophilus” means “those who love God.” So the purpose of Luke’s gospel is for all who love God to have certain assurance of what they have been taught about Jesus’ word and deed. When everything is uncertain in this world, Jesus and his word are absolutely certain and trustworthy and this is the gospel; the good news with great joy for all people on earth.

Look at verses 5-7. “In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.” Verse 5a briefly gives us a historical time of the events of this chapter we see. Herod king of Judea was one of the cruelest kings in human history. Herod killed even his own sons with his own hands and he was the one who killed all the baby boys two years and younger in Bethlehem to kill baby Jesus. Under such cruel king’s ruthless ruling, it would be very hard to see secure and certain future.

However Luke skims over Herod as if he was nothing and places his focus on the lives of two old people Zechariah and Elisabeth. Let’s look at verse 6 again. “Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.” When all the world seemed to be dark forgetting God and his love under the ruthless king’s ruling, there was a shiny star-like two old couple who really caught God’s eyes. They were Zechariah and Elisabeth. Both of them were upright in the sight of God. How could they become upright in the sight of God? Firstly, verse 6b says, “… observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.” In the Old Testament, there are several parts which this word “blameless” was used. In Gen 6:9, when God described Noah’s account, he said like this; Noah was a righteous man, *blameless* among the people of his time, and he walked with God. In Gen17:1, when God appeared to Abraham and gently rebuked his lack of faith, he said like this, “When Abraham was ninety nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me and be *blameless*.” As we know Noah and Abraham were not perfect men without flaws. But both of them gained God’s credit by their faith and practical obedience. Likewise, Zechariah and Elisabeth were also blameless in the sight of God by their faith and practical obedience. Secondly, it was because they were so faithful until the time they were very old without children. In verse 7, although they were upright and blameless in the sight of God, they had no children which were considered as disgraceful thing. But this old couple did not make this problem as their excuse not to be faithful to God. People are faithful to God when things go well smoothly as they expected but if something does not go well as they expected, they lose their faithfulness to God. But this old couple did not lose their faithfulness regardless of their human situation and condition. By this faithfulness, they gained their credit of uprightness before God. Thirdly, Zechariah was a man of sincere prayer. In verse13, when the angel of the Lord appeared to him, he said to Zechariah, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard.” This verse teaches us that Zechariah was a man of sincere prayer and prayer is the expression of our faith depending on God. Through prayer life Zechariah could maintain live and practical love and trust relationship with God. This was another reason why they could become upright in the sight of God.

Let’s look at verses 8-10. Once when Zechariah’s division was on priestly duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. In Zechariah’ time, there were so many priests. There were 24 divisions of priests and each division was made up of 1000 priests. So according to their custom, they chose one priest by lot among 24 divisions twice a year and since there were so many priests in each division, many of them died without enjoying even one time of the privilege of going into the temple to serve the Lord. But Zechariah was chosen by lot for this special service and in this special service, a very special thing happened to him. Look at verses 11-13. Let’s read these verses together. “Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elisabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.’” Zechariah was a priest and he entered the temple to pray to God as the representative prayer servant of all Israel people. He was supposed to pray for his national and all community issue. But according to the angel’s word, he must have prayed for his own secret prayer topic which is his prayer for a son as well as national prayer topics. Anyway, here what we learn importantly is that God hears and answers our personal earnest prayer.

**II. He will be a joy and delight to you and many people (14-25)**

Let’s look at verses 14-17. “He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous-to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” John the name of the son whom Elisabeth would bear to Zechariah means “God’s gracious gift” and he will be a joy and delight to Zechariah and many will also rejoice because of his birth. When we think about the image of John the Baptist, his presence may look burdened to us because he always preached the message of repentance with straight rebuking. But in actuality, the angel prophesied that he would be a joy and delight to many people not to mention to Zechariah and Elisabeth. Why is it so? In verse 15, it was because he would be great in the sight of the Lord. Then why would he be great in the sight of the Lord?

**First, he will be great because he will live a pure life**. Verse 15 says, “He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.” The phrase, “he is never to take wine or other fermented drink” means that he will be like a Nazirite who is set apart to God form birth. In most cases of past and present times, drinking is the starting point of evil-doings. The bible warns us not to be drunk but instead be filled with the Holy Spirit. When Jesus prayed for his disciples in his final time on earth, he prayed for their pure life. “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.” (John 17:17&19) Pure life is the source of all power for a man of God because God uses us only when we are pure in our heart. John was great and was used by God mightily because he lived pure life before God. Sometimes we misunderstand that if we seek pure life, it would be boring without any fun. This is Satan’s lie. Pure life is the secret that a man of God can truly enjoy true joy and peace and inner life and power. Anyone who wants to be used by God should seek pure life.

**Second, he will be great because he will bring many people of Israel back to the Lord**. Then, how will he bring many people back to the Lord? Look at verse 17 again. “He will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah.” Elijah was the prophet who fought against 850 the prophets of Baal and Asherah in Mount Carmel and slaughtered them all and rebuked wavering people of Israel, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” At that time, people put their legs on two sides; one leg on Baal worship –in modern time- love of money and physical pleasure and fun and the other leg on God. They couldn’t decide one life radically between two lives. But Elijah vividly revealed who is real God and challenged them to turn to God clearly. Then, people turned to God crying out, “The Lord-he is God! The Lord-he is God!” John will challenge the people of Israel and bring their hearts to God in the same spirit and power that Elijah had.

When the angel prophesied about John’s bringing back ministry, he especially mentioned two things. First, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the second things, to turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. It is really remarkable that God saw the problem of the fathers in his time as one of the main problems of his time. Not only in Zechariah’s time but also in our time, there are many fathers who neglect their responsibility and this is the main source of many problems in our family and society. Second, he will turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous. All man’s fundamental problem is the problem of disobedience to God. People are too proud to obey God. Because of this pride, all men became the slave of Satan and are all perishing. But John will bring them back to the Lord in their obedience by serving them in the spirit and power of Elijah. John will be great in the sight of God because he will bring many people back to the Lord.

How did Zechariah respond to the good news that angel brought him? In verse 18, he asks the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am old man and my wife is well along in years.” He was a man of prayer. He had faith in God’s sovereign rule in history. But when his prayer was answered finally, he was too happy to believe it. Momentarily he fell into human thinking, forgetting that nothing is impossible with God. So the angel Gabriel rebuked him, “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.” Here we learn that when we cannot say the word of faith, it is better to be silent and pray to God until we may say the word of faith beyond our situation and condition. Look at verses 23&24. Zechariah completed his service as priest of the temple and went home. Soon after this, his wife Elisabeth became pregnant and for 5 months remained in seclusion to make sure of her pregnancy. When she was sure of her pregnancy after 5 months, finally she confessed, “The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

In conclusion, in today’s passage we learned what ministry John the Baptist the forerunner of Jesus Christ will serve. He will bring many people’s heart back to the Lord through his pure life before God and in the spirit and power of Elijah. Christmas is the time for us to turn our heart to the Lord and accept him as our Savior and Lord newly. To bring people’s heart to the Lord more, we need John-like servants of Christ who are willing to live pure life and are filled with spirit and power by the help of the Holy Spirit. Also we need Zechariah and Elisabeth-like senior servants who is faithful no matter what difficulties they have through their life of obedience and fully dedicated prayer life. May God bless all our coworkers and leaders and students to grow such exemplary man and woman of God! I pray in Jesus name. Amen.