

A Father's Prophecy

Devotional Reading: [Luke 1:5–17](#)

Background Scripture: [Luke 1:5–23, 57–80](#)

[Luke 1:67–80](#)

⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

**⁶⁸ “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.**

**⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David**

⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

**⁷¹ salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—**

**⁷² to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,**

⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

**⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear**

⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

**⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a
prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the LORD to
prepare the way for him,**

**⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,**

**⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven**

**⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death, to
guide our feet into the path of peace.”**

⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

Key Text

You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. —Luke 1:76–77

A King Forever and Ever

Unit 1: Jesus, the Heir of David

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Zechariah’s prophecy.
2. Explain ways the prophecy could have been misunderstood in the first century AD.
3. Identify any “wilderness” of preparation the learner is in and opportunities for growth.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Present-Day Heralds
- B. Lesson Context

I. Prologue (Luke 1:67)

II. Celebrating God (Luke 1:68–75)

- A. For Promises Kept (vv. 68–70)
- B. For Results Certain (vv. 71–75)

III. Appointing John (Luke 1:76–78a)

- A. His Calling (v. 76)
- B. His Task (vv. 77–78a)

IV. Predicting Result (Luke 1:78b–79)

Deadline: Year 2020?

V. Epilogue (Luke 1:80)

Your Preparation Context (s)

Conclusion

- A. Still Pointing to Jesus
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Abijah Uh-*bye*-juh.
Gabriel *Gay*-bree-ul.
Josephus Jo-*see*-fus.
Messiah Meh-*sigh*-uh.
Zechariah *Zek*-uh-**rye**-uh.

I. Introduction

A. Present-Day Heralds

Over a decade ago, the mascot at the college where I work changed from a saint to a herald. At the time, some people expressed hesitation and questioned the change. One reason for the hesitation was that the role of a *herald* is relatively unknown.

Some countries, such as the United Kingdom, still have active heralds as employees of the sovereign, but such positions are not found in the majority of countries. Perhaps we have lost something in not maintaining the role of a herald.

B. Lesson Context

The Gospel of Luke was written about AD 60 by Luke the physician and traveling companion of the apostle Paul ([Colossians 4:14](#)). It was probably written during the period of a couple of years in which Paul was imprisoned at Caesarea ([Acts 23–24](#)). Luke was not an eyewitness to the events of Jesus' life. Even so, Luke was meticulous in his research ([Luke 1:1–3](#)). The result is the New Testament's marvelous third Gospel, written so that the reader may be convinced of the certainty of the book's contents. One of the individuals who Luke could have interviewed was Mary, the mother of Jesus, who would have had personal knowledge of much of the events of both the birth of John and, of course, Jesus.

Luke's Gospel begins by introducing a priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. The couple was considered "righteous in the sight of God" and blameless regarding obedience to God's commandments ([Luke 1:6](#)). At the time of the introduction in the Gospel, the couple was without children due to their age and Elizabeth's barrenness ([1:7](#)).

The fact that Zechariah served as a priest in the division of Abijah ([Luke 1:5](#)) is more significant than it might seem at first. According to the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, the priesthood of that time was organized into 24 divisions. That matches the organization noted in [1 Chronicles 24:1–19](#). Every division served in the temple for roughly two nonconsecutive weeks each year. The assigned priests would complete the necessary tasks for the temple, including accepting and offering sacrifices, burning incense, and leading prayers ([1 Chronicles 6:48–49](#); compare [23:28–32](#)).

During the time of Zechariah's service, an angel of the Lord named Gabriel visited him and informed him that he would have a son ([Luke 1:8–19](#)). Zechariah responded with doubt, questioning the validity of the angel's prophecy ([1:18](#)). The angel proclaimed that because of Zechariah's doubt, he

would be unable to speak until the prophecies regarding the birth of the son were fulfilled (1:19–20).

The Scripture text in today’s lesson includes a song of praise known as the *Benedictus*. The source of this title is the first word of [Luke 1:68](#) in the Latin translation of the Bible known as the Vulgate, which dates to the fourth century AD. Perhaps it is better known to you as *Zechariah’s Song*.

I. Prologue

([Luke 1:67](#))

67. His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

The disbelief of *Zechariah* when he received the angel’s message (see [Lesson Context](#)) was replaced with being *filled with the Holy Spirit*. Luke, the author, seems to have a special interest in this person of the Trinity, who is mentioned in this Gospel about the same number of times as the other three Gospels combined. In the book of Acts, Luke’s subsequent work, the Holy Spirit is mentioned more than 40 times. The presence of God’s Spirit has been a necessary prerequisite for God’s people to serve him through prophetic ministry (examples: [Numbers 11:25–27](#); [Acts 2:17–18](#)).

II. Celebrating God

([Luke 1:68–75](#))

A. For Promises Kept (vv. 68–70)

68. “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

Zechariah begins a poetic expression of blessing and praise to God. Employing parallel expressions typical of biblical poetry, his song echoes key themes of prophetic promise from Israel’s Scriptures. As God had fulfilled his surprising promise that Zechariah would become a father, so God would fulfill his greatest promises for all.

Songs and psalms of thanksgiving sometimes include a proclamation of praise to *the Lord, the God of Israel* (compare [Psalms 72:18](#); [84:11](#)). Mary’s song of praise, called the *Magnificat*, also begins with her glorifying the Lord ([Luke 1:46–47](#)).

Zechariah praised the Lord because of the Lord’s actions for his people. The Old Testament describes how the Lord had come to his people for blessing (examples: [Genesis 21:1](#); [Ruth 1:6](#)) or because of their sin (examples: [Exodus 20:5](#); [32:34](#)).

The reason for his coming at this particular time was so that *his people* might be *redeemed*, a conclusion also reached by the crowd in [Luke 7:16](#). As we attempt to grasp this concept, we can simplify by realizing that when we are introduced to Jesus in the pages of the New Testament, two issues are of utmost importance: *who Jesus is* in his essence and *what Jesus did* in terms of his mission. The shorthand way of saying this is that we are learning about the person and work of Christ.

The four Gospels focus heavily on the first part of that inquiry, on establishing and describing the person of Christ. The four Gospels, however, spend almost no time explaining the work of Christ. We hasten to add that by “work” here, we don’t mean Jesus’ miracles of healing, exorcism, etc. By “work,”

we are referring to the eternal results of his death, burial, and resurrection. Thus, we have to wait until Paul’s epistles before we can fully grasp the “how” of the phrase *redeemed them*.

69. “He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David

The song’s prophetic nature is on display as it announces the means by which redemption arrives. In the Old Testament, animal horns were symbols of power (examples: [Deuteronomy 33:17](#); [Psalm 18:2](#); [Zechariah 1:18–21](#)). Through the power of the Lord God, the promised redemption—a *horn of salvation*—would come, vanquishing enemies and ruling as Messiah (see [Psalm 132:17](#)).

Zechariah recognized that the Messiah would come from one specific lineage: *the house of ... David*. Centuries before Zechariah lived, the prophet Nathan had stated that the Lord would establish his kingdom in and through the house of David ([2 Samuel 7:12–16](#); compare [Isaiah 9:6–7](#)). This would bring righteousness, peace, and salvation ([Isaiah 11:1–9](#); [Jeremiah 23:5–6](#); [33:15–16](#)). About six months after the birth of John, a descendant of the house of David was indeed born to fulfill the promises; his name was Jesus ([Luke 1:27–32](#); [3:23](#)).

70. “(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

This verse reminds readers that God’s plan was not a new thing; rather, it had been set forth through *his holy prophets* of centuries past (example: [Jeremiah 23:5](#); compare [Acts 3:21](#); [Romans 1:2](#); [Hebrews 1:1](#); [1 Peter 1:10–12](#)). The person and work of Jesus the Messiah validated the predictions of the prophets ([Luke 24:25–27](#)). The message of the prophets comes to a focal point in the message of Zechariah’s son, henceforth known as John the Baptist, who later proclaimed, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” when seeing Jesus ([John 1:29](#)).

What Do You Think?

What has been your experience of reading or studying the Old Testament prophets?

Digging Deeper

What preparation could make your study more beneficial to your spiritual development?

B. For Results Certain (vv. 71–75)

71. “salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—

The theme of salvation by God’s Messiah is repeated often in the Gospels. Indeed, that message of salvation is their primary message! But as events would unfold, God’s idea of who their main *enemies* were didn’t match who the Jewish leaders and people thought were their enemies. This misidentification distracted Jesus’ own apostles right up to the time of Jesus’ ascension ([Acts 1:6](#)). “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” ([1 John 3:8](#)), not the works of the Roman Empire.

What Do You Think?

What sets biblical teaching about enemies apart from worldly wisdom on the topic?

Digging Deeper

How do your speech and actions to enemies mark you as a follower of Christ?

72. “to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant,

God’s promise *to show mercy* is witnessed in passages such as [Micah 7:20](#): “You will be faithful to Jacob, and show love to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our ancestors in days long ago.” Considering the ancient use of the literary technique of parallelism, this is the same as remembering *his holy covenant* (compare [Psalms 105:8–9](#); [106:45](#); [Ezekiel 16:60](#)). The next verse offers an additional layer to this parallelism.

73. “the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

This *oath* is described in [Genesis 22:16–18](#); it is the same as “his holy covenant” of [Luke 1:72](#), just considered. Consider these two time frames: as we are now looking 2,000 years into the past to consider what Zechariah has written, Zechariah himself was looking 2,000 years into his own past to consider the covenant with *our father Abraham*! The centuries have proven God to be trustworthy and faithful; he keeps his promises to his people ([Joshua 21:45](#); [Psalm 145:13](#)).

The passage of centuries had not dimmed Zechariah’s expectations, and neither should they dim ours. As Zechariah could praise the Lord God, so should we (compare other praise in [Luke 1:46–55](#); [2:28–32](#), [36–38](#)).

74. “to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear

The oath granted to Abraham extended to the people of Zechariah’s day (*us*). Nine months of being unable to speak ([Luke 1:20](#), [64](#)) had allowed Zechariah time to reflect on the fact that when the Lord speaks, we should listen rather than run off at the mouth!

As a priest, Zechariah was intensely interested in being able to *serve* the Lord (compare [Hebrews 9:14](#)). Interestingly, the word translated “serve” here is also translated “worship” in [Acts 7:42](#); [24:14](#). To serve God is to worship him; to worship God is to serve him. By the Messiah’s deliverance, God’s people will be able to do so *without fear*, without the specter of further defeat or persecution hanging over their heads. The way it will happen—through Jesus’ death and resurrection—and one result of its happening—freedom from earthly fear ([Romans 8:15](#); [Philippians 1:14](#))—will astonish everyone. As Zechariah speaks, the Israelites live in fear of their *enemies*: the Roman overlords and the Jewish leadership ([John 9:22](#); [12:42](#); [16:2](#)). The greater fear that God will eliminate, however, is the fear of death ([Hebrews 2:15](#)).

75. “in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

As a devoted priest, Zechariah knew what it meant to serve the Lord. All his life, he had been “righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly” ([Luke 1:6](#)). God desires the same for others. *Holiness* means to be set apart from sin; *righteousness* means that the people always do the right thing in the eyes of God. The only other place in the New Testament where the words translated “holiness” and “righteousness” occur together is [Ephesians 4:24](#): “[You were taught] to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (compare [Titus 2:11–14](#)).

Zechariah’s expectation was partially fulfilled when Christ established the church, whose members are a “holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” ([1 Peter 2:5](#)). The ultimate fulfillment will come when we serve Christ in full holiness in Heaven ([Revelation 22:3](#)).

What Do You Think?

How accurate would it be to say that you serve God without fear and in holiness and righteousness?

Digging Deeper

To the extent that this statement is not completely true, what step(s) can you take to improve this week?

III. Appointing John (Luke 1:76–78a)

A. His Calling (v. 76)

76. “And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

Zechariah switches focus to his (only) *child*, John, and John’s pending role in God’s plan of salvation. That role will be to prepare hearts and minds for the coming of a greater one. John was to be like a herald, coming in advance of the king and announcing the king’s arrival so that people might prepare. John was to be “a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him’” (Luke 3:4, quoting Isaiah 40:3; compare Malachi 3:1). Some 30 years later, John’s ministry fulfilled the words of his father (Matthew 3:11–12; Mark 1:1–8; Luke 3:1–18; John 1:19–34).

Implied in this ministry is the kind of prophetic work Israel knew from earlier times when prophets like Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah took up their own prophetic ministries. This child would become *a prophet of the Most High* (compare Mark 11:32) as the forerunner of the coming Lord. He would be like the prophet Elijah, preparing the people for the promised salvation (Matthew 11:14). Such a description is consistent with the announcement of the angel regarding John’s birth, saying that John will “go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17) as he turns “the people of Israel to the Lord their God” (1:16).



Visual for [Lesson 3](#). As the class discusses verse 79, ask learners to take one minute to consider whether there is any darkness they have not renounced.

What Do You Think?

To what degree is our calling (example: [Matthew 28:16–20](#)) like John's calling?

Digging Deeper

What challenges do we face in fulfilling our calling? What encouragement can we take from John's example of ministry?

B. His Task (vv. 77–78a)

77. “to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, John's ministry included calling for repentance ([Matthew 3:2](#)) and “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” ([Luke 3:3](#)).

The *salvation* mentioned here would prove to be more than just political salvation from oppression; *people* would be offered a spiritual, eternal *salvation*. The hope and mercy that God's people desired would come from God's redemption and salvation in Christ ([Acts 4:8–12](#); [Romans 8](#); [Hebrews 9:28](#); etc.).

78a. “because of the tender mercy of our God,

The designation of the Lord as *our God* occurs more than 200 times in the Bible. God is not an abstract concept; he is intensely personal. The fictitious gods of paganism cannot be characterized by their *tender mercy*—those gods are seen as fickle. The word translated “tender” is interesting. In a literal, physical sense, it refers to one's bowels or intestines ([Acts 1:18](#)). In a figurative or emotional sense, this area of a person was considered to be the center or origin of compassion (see the word's translation as “affection” in [2 Corinthians 7:15](#); an intense form of the word occurs in [James 5:11](#)).

IV. Predicting Result ([Luke 1:78b–79](#))

78b–79. “by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

By contrast, today we speak of one's heart as that center or origin. So, we can say that Zechariah's Song reminds us that God's motivation for sending the Messiah is the mercy of God's own heart. That mercy brings something like the dawning of a new day.

Darkness is a common image for the state of those who oppose God (examples: [Psalm 107:10–11](#); [Jeremiah 23:12](#); [John 3:19](#); [1 Corinthians 4:5](#); [Ephesians 6:12](#)). In this state, *death* is inevitable ([Romans 5:12](#); [6:23](#)). But God promises *to shine [light] on those* in this state ([Isaiah 9:2](#); [Matthew 4:16](#); [Acts 26:18](#)). It is Jesus who brings light into darkness ([John 8:12](#)). A sad and continuing part of the problem, however, is that although “light has come into the world, ... people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil” ([John 3:19](#)).

Deadline: Year 2020?

Back in the year 2010, a former Minister of Defence in Canada revealed his skeptical view of humanity's future in his book *Light at the End of the Tunnel*. He asserted that the year 2020 was the deadline for ending dependence on fossil fuels for energy. Exotic forms of energy already existed, he claimed, but a "shadow government" controlled their secret. One of the writer's imperatives was that all people must find ways to work together for the common good.

As of this writing (October 2023), the dire predictions have not come to pass, claimed "right nows" have not been verified, and working together for the common good is as much of a pipe dream as it ever was.

Two millennia ago, Zechariah announced by the Holy Spirit a very dissimilar "was / now / will be." Unlike that of the doomsday writer above, the elements of the prophecy of Zechariah lined up perfectly, as 2,000 years of history have proven. Those who prophesy by their own insight aren't always guaranteed to be correct; those who prophesy by God's empowerment are always right, to the farthest distance of the future. How will you prepare yourself to demonstrate this to a skeptic?

—R. L. N.

V. Epilogue (Luke 1:80)

80. And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

This verse takes us out of Zechariah's Song and summarizes John's formative years. Luke's Gospel provides parallel statements about Jesus (Luke 2:40, 52). Becoming *strong in spirit* may refer either to John's determined willingness to conform to God's will, or it may describe the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life.

Your Preparation Context(s)

The contrast between what we might call the "preparation contexts" of Joseph and Moses is fascinating: Joseph was prepared in a desert to serve in a palace (Genesis 37:1–22; 41:39–40); Moses was prepared in a palace to serve in a desert (Exodus 2:10; 3:1). Other preparation contexts are equally fascinating. The apostle Paul, for example, was a rising star in first-century Judaism (Acts 22:3; Galatians 1:14). But when he as persecutor became the persecuted, his preparation context changed abruptly from that of the city to the desert (Galatians 1:17–18) to ... everywhere.

We could explore other examples. Springing immediately to mind are the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and John the Baptist. Such an exploration also invites a consideration of our own personal preparation contexts. The biblical examples teach us that as much as we might like to have a comfortable, familiar preparation environment that is followed by an equally comfortable service setting, it just won't happen that way. That's not God's pattern. In what ways do you need to change your expectations in this regard?

What Do You Think?

How can the “wilderness” be a place of preparation for us?

Digging Deeper

What practices can prepare us to be formed by these desolate experiences?

Conclusion

A. Still Pointing to Jesus

Speechless for nine months, Zechariah offered an impressive, memorable song in celebration of John’s birth. Layering phrase after phrase from the ancient prophets, he made clear to all that the time of fulfillment had arrived.

We are the beneficiaries of those promises and their fulfillment. We have the holy Scriptures so that we can know the factual certainty of it all ([Luke 1:4](#)). As we do, we experience the salvation, mercy, knowledge, and light that God gives in Jesus Christ. Our expression of joy and thanks ought to be at least as vivid as Zechariah’s, if not more so.

B. Prayer

Great God, we thank you that by your mercy we have received the fulfillment of your eternal promises in Jesus. May we live in full confidence of your abiding faithfulness. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Reject the darkness,
embrace the light.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

As learners enter the classroom, distribute index cards and pens and ask learners to write down one prediction about the future. It can be silly or serious and does not have to be spiritual or Bible-

related. Once all learners have had time to respond, ask volunteers to share predictions with the class. Have learners rank each prediction from 1 to 5, 1 being least likely to happen and 5 being most likely. When all the volunteers have shared their predictions, ask learners to explain the criteria they considered regarding whether a prediction seems more or less likely to come true.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “False Prophecies” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs or small groups to complete the exercise as indicated.

After either activity, tell the class, “Today we are going to study a prophecy made by the father of John the Baptist that is related not only to his life but also to the coming of Jesus.”

Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read [Luke 1:67–80](#). Work together as a class to outline God’s previous words and actions as recounted by Zechariah, as well as the anticipated works that would be fulfilled in John and Jesus. Work in small groups to find the Bible references for the people, events, or promises that Zechariah mentioned as having happened in the past (roughly [Luke 1:67–75](#)). Pay special attention to concepts like the “horn of salvation” ([1:69](#)) that are somewhat obscure *and* others like God’s “holy covenant” ([1:72](#)) that might seem so familiar that believers might take their meanings for granted. Consult the commentary for cross references and other helps as desired. Bring the class back together to discuss the references or concepts they found to be particularly important or surprising.

In the same small groups as before, have learners find the Bible references for the people, events, or promises that at the time were yet to be fulfilled by John or Jesus. Encourage learners once again to pay special attention to any concepts with which they are unfamiliar or that may seem overly familiar. When groups have finished, bring them back together to discuss their key findings.

Into Life

Ask learners to discuss how these examples from [Luke 1:67–80](#) of God’s past provision give them confidence about his continued care in the future. Allow one minute for silent reflection on any situation where learners need to apply this confidence.

Distribute pens and paper to the class. In small groups, have learners work to update Zechariah’s prophecy as a blessing for a new minister. This blessing needs to include two parts: (1) praise for God’s past work and faithfulness, and (2) hopes for the minister’s future. Take into account not only Israel’s history as Zechariah knew it but also the history of the church.

Option. If your congregation is welcoming or training a new minister or sending out a missionary, consider personalizing your hopes and prayers to that person’s specific context.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the exercise “Baby Dedication” from the activity page. Give learners time to complete the assignment as instructed before sharing with a partner. If you choose to use this activity, be sensitive to learners’ different experiences with parenting, childlessness, and other potentially painful situations. Encourage partners to pray together when they have finished discussing.

Conclude the class in prayer and/or a hymn or chorus familiar to the whole class. Appropriate choices might include “This Is My Father’s World” or “Good Good Father.”

To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in Acrobat Reader and print.

[Activity Page \(December 15—A Father’s Prophecy\)](#)
