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Elizabeth:
Blessed
is She

#1246-B
Series: Little Known Legends

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Elizabeth: Blessed is She

THE BEGINNING OF BEGINNINGS

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,

So that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

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. (Luke 1:1-7 NIV)

And so begins the gospel according to Luke. Dr. Luke, who according to himself was a careful investigator of everything from the beginning, has, according to his own writings, determined to write an orderly account of those things. Sounds like a physician, doesn't it? A "careful investigation" and an "orderly account" were needed of the things which had transpired, and the things which transpired had to begin with Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Matthew and Mark begin their accounts of John the Baptist with his ministry. But the amazing circumstances behind these two supernatural births of John the Baptist and Jesus had to be explored by the physician-disciple as he wrote his account of the Master's life. And so he carefully pulls back the delicate curtain that hides the very personal visits these two families had with God's angels, and the very personal visits they had with one another.

None of this was hearsay. Luke was careful to clear that up at the beginning. In verse 2, he reminds us that this "orderly account" was constructed from the direct testimony of "eye witnesses and

servants of the word.” His reason was just as clear. It was that “we might know the certainty of what we have been taught” as we see in verse 4. So what is unfolding here is an eyewitness account of God’s preparation for the greatest event ever to transpire in the history of mankind, the coming of God to earth.

It all began in the time of Herod, king of Judea, a time in history which followed what appeared to be a spiritual drought. No prophets of God had appeared on the horizon to either rebuke or encourage the people. It was what has come to be referred to as the “silent” time in Scriptural history. When would the people hear from God again? The answer is found in the next few verses.

Here are the two main characters of chapter one of the story:

1- A godly man named Zechariah, who was a member of the priesthood, of the order of Abijah.

2- His wife, a godly woman named Elizabeth, a descendant of Aaron.

They are an insignificant couple, as we shall see in a moment. They bear a certain reproach that has caused them to retract into the shadows, and their age makes them unlikely candidates for greatness. Their time, many would say, “has already passed.”

As we have read, Zechariah was a priest. Every direct descendant of Aaron was automatically a priest, which meant that for practical purposes, there were far too many priests. Only at the time of the Passover, at Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles did all the priests serve. For the rest of the year, each group served one week twice a year. Those weeks, so far apart, were looked forward to with eager anticipation by the priest who took his role seriously.

Priests were allowed to marry only women of absolute Jewish lineage. If they were fortunate enough to find a woman who was also a direct descendant of Aaron, they were considered blessed indeed. Such was the case with Zechariah.

Because there were nearly 20,000 priests, there would be nearly 1,000 on duty at any one time. So within the group in service, lots would be drawn to see which of the priests would have the privilege of serving. Every morning and every evening sacrifices were made for the entire nation. A burnt offering of a male lamb without spot or blemish was made, before which incense was burned so that the sacrifices might make “a sweet-smelling” offering in the nostrils of God.

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It was entirely possible that a priest could serve his whole life and never get the opportunity to burn incense. If he was granted that joy by lot, it could well be the most important day in his life. Here was a man named Zechariah, who, in all likelihood, facing the sunset years of his priesthood, had never stood before the incense altar in the court of the Temple. It would be a spiritual experience for him unrivalled in his life. Here is what transpired:

Once when Zechariah's division was on 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.

And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

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 Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.

He will be a joy and a 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. (Luke 1:8-15 NIV)

AN ANGELIC VISITOR

This was a moment Zechariah had been waiting for all his life. No doubt his spirit within him was turned Godward as never before. He was a just and upright man, a man whose life exemplified godliness. As was the custom, while he was inside the inner court burning incense, the crowds were assembled outside praying.

Suddenly the angel Gabriel appeared before him just to the right of the altar. At first, he was speechless. The angel said,

Do not be afraid. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. (Luke 1:13 NIV)

That news alone was enough to cause Zechariah to doubt. But the next statement was the final blow. Not only was his wife, like Sarah, to bear a child, in her old age, but according to this

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mysterious figure who stood before him, this was to be no ordinary child. Look at the promises:

- 1- He will be a joy and delight to you.
- 2- Many will rejoice because of his birth.
- 3- He will be great in the sight of the Lord.
- 4- He will never touch wine or strong drink.
- 5- He will be filled with the Spirit from birth.

The angel went on:

He will bring back many of the people of Israel 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. (Luke 1:16,17 NIV)

6- He was to be the vessel to bring Israel to repentance.

7- He will be likened to Elijah in power.

8- He will be the tool God will use to turn the hearts of fathers back to their children and the disobedient will hear his voice and return to God.

9- He will be the one who makes the way for Messiah to come.

Try to imagine now, that you are perhaps upwards of eighty years of age, and you have been praying for a child for sixty years. The last few years your prayers have been more or less perfunctory. Human reasoning limits your faith. Yes, you know about Abraham and Sarah, but you're not Abraham and Sarah.

In the Hebrew culture, to be barren was to suffer reproach. If children are a gift from God, and they are His reward, then Jewish parents who bore no children were considered to be in poor standing with God. Women who suffered this fate often simply resigned themselves to second-class citizenship and recoiled into the life of a recluse in their shame.

So here you are, with your possibly first chance ever to actually offer up incense to God. You are overwhelmed at the spirituality of the moment. And once more you ask God to honor you with a child. Suddenly a bright light fills the temple. To the right of the altar of incense stands the angel Gabriel. He tells you not to be afraid. No doubt he sees you shaking from head to foot. Then he proceeds to tell you, old man that you are, that you are going to be a father

after all.

That would be hard enough for the heart of an old man to bear. But then the angel begins to describe the character and ministry of this child-to-be. That proves to be more than you can believe.

Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

The angel answered, “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.”

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.

When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

(Luke 1:18-22 NIV)

A LACK OF FAITH

Zechariah’s response to Gabriel’s announcement was somewhat like Sarah’s. “If this is so, prove it...” might be a simple translation of what happened. “I’m an old-timer and so is Liz,” was his response. “How can I be sure of this before I go off and tell my wife something that might not be true?”

Gabriel took offense. The name of the game was faith, and faith is the “evidence of things not seen.” “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God and God has sent me to you with this exact prophecy. But since you did not believe, you will not be able to speak until the child is born, but every thing I said will come true.”

So the fulfillment of the promise was not predicated on his believing. But because of his faithlessness, he would be stricken dumb until the child was born. He exited the temple, but the glazed look on his face, coupled with his inability to talk caused the people to surmise that he had experienced a vision from God. The passage concludes,

When his time of service was completed, he returned home.

(Luke 1:23 NIV)

The scene now shifts to the home front, and we begin to read the story of the godly woman who would bear the child who would

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herald the coming of the King. Here is what it says,

After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.

“The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,

To a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.

(Luke 1:24-27 NIV)

So these two miraculous events, back to back in Luke’s account, now begin to come together. Elizabeth, like Sarah, experienced the joy of her first child at an age many consider too old to be grandparents. For five months she hid herself, praising God all the while that she had found favor with Him, and that He had removed her reproach. During the sixth month of her pregnancy, another miracle occurred. Once again an angel appeared, this time to Elizabeth’s cousin, a virgin named Mary. And to her was promised an even more awesome privilege, the privilege of giving birth to the Son of God. The truth of the matter is that in the routine of studying the story of Joseph and Mary, we sometimes miss the amazing character of this woman who was selected by God to be the mother of the herald who would announce the Messiah’s coming. She was no ordinary woman. Oh, her circumstances were ordinary, and her plight, by human standards, not at all perfect.

But she was no ordinary woman. God had selected her because of her righteousness and because of her faith. And because of her faith, he had to withhold from her the very thing she wanted most, in order to demonstrate that faith to its fullest. Oh that we could see how often God’s not answering our prayers is the greatest testimony He can give of our faith. If by not answering, we would cease believing, He would not be glorified. But if we will keep on waiting for the promise even if and especially when there seems no more natural reason to expect an answer, then we are candidates for miracles indeed.

So often the silence in the heavens is a tribute to the faith of the object of that silence. Such was the case here. The story takes up there. Mary has asked the angel, “How can I have a child, being a virgin?” Here was the reply,

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The angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.

And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month.

For nothing will be impossible with God.”

(Luke 1:35-37 NASB)

Nothing is impossible, indeed. And it is the presence of the seemingly impossible that sets the stage for God to act. That may be where you are today. You may be in the twilight of life and have waited seemingly forever for God to deliver that child or that mate or to develop through you a message and a ministry. And the longer you live, the less likely it seems that your prayers will ever be answered. Take heart, Beloved. The end of hope is the beginning of faith. The vanishing of the possible leaves room on the stage of life for the impossible to make its appearance.

A VISIT FROM MARY

The scene now shifts to Elizabeth’s house, and history merges into one precious moment when first the herald (though unborn) meets the yet unborn King.

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea,

where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!

But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed,

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for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. (Luke 1:39-50 NIV)

And so the triumphant meeting between these two women, so divinely chosen to make history, takes place. This passage makes you wonder how people can construe that life does not begin until a child is delivered? When Mary entered the room, John leaped for joy although he was still in his mother's womb. He was alive indeed. Even before he entered this world, he knew that his primary role would be not to draw attention to himself, but rather to honor the one who was coming.

At the very presence of Mary, Elizabeth was filled with the Spirit and proclaimed "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you bear."

Now here was a woman far beyond her years of child-bearing, a woman from whom God had removed her reproach. And yet, she did not see herself as one to be honored. In fact, her words to Mary were, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you bear." Why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

Here was a woman, in the midst of a miracle, who was willing to take second place. And her humility as a mother was passed on to her son. For though he was a man of courage, boldness, and outspoken prophetic wisdom, he always understood his place. It was he who gave us the words we all need to utter daily.

He must increase, but I must decrease. (John 3:30 NKJV)

Surely his mother transmitted to him the gravity and the humility of the role he was called to perform.

Mary and Elizabeth had many days and nights together to pray and praise and imagine what God had in store for the two gifts they bore from Him.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah,

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but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.”
(Luke 1:56-60 NIV)

The confused relatives asked Zechariah, and he, still unable to speak, wrote, “He shall be called John”. Immediately his tongue was loosed, and he began to sing an anthem of praise to his God. The passage continues,

Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.
(Luke 1:66 NIV)

BLESSED IS SHE

The hand of history has turned many pages since that fateful day when John the Baptist, true to his calling, pointed us to Jesus and then slipped quietly into the background. And even more quietly, Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, slipped into the back pages of the chronicles of Scripture as well.

But, oh, how important that woman was to God, a woman who, like Abraham, had enough faith to believe that “what God has promised, He is able also to perform.” When God spoke, she believed. “Blessed is she,” she said of Mary. Those words can be said of her as well. “Blessed is she...indeed.”

The heritage Elizabeth leaves us is a heritage of greatness. She lived much of her life in undeserved humiliation, suffering the reproach of being childless, when indeed her calling to be childless was not a condemnation, but rather a commendation from God. God searched for a woman whose heart was so yielded to Him that she could bear the undeserved shame and still not lose her utter confidence that God, if He willed to do so, could give her a child. And the older she got, the more faith she was required to have. Zechariah simply could not believe without more of a sign from God. There is no indication that Elizabeth ever doubted.

But not only was she a woman of faith, she was a woman of humility. She knew the Scriptures, and she knew her place. Her role was to be the mother of the one who would cry out to the world, “Behold the Lamb of God.” Hers was to be the miraculous birth of the second most important man to be born in centuries. But then from the shadows came Mary, and an even more miraculous birth was to overshadow hers, and the child born to Mary was to be by far the greater.

Yet when Mary entered the room, she humbled herself

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immediately and praised God for the blessing He had given to her. Mary's Son was to walk on the stage of life, and when He did, Elizabeth's son would fade into the distance immediately. Yet this woman was honored just to be a part of calling attention to the King. So unlike the mother of James and John was she. There was a mother demanding of God recognition for her boys. Here was a mother humbly grateful for a boy who would simply point to the Master.

Finally, here was a woman of spiritual sensitivity. When Mary but entered the room, her baby leaped for joy, and she, being filled with the Holy Spirit, uttered those words which have traveled down the corridors of time as an anthem of praise that the hand of God would bless a life by honoring her with the privilege of giving birth to the King.

And though sometimes misused, this passage ought to bring us joy. For it was written to us as well as to Mary. We, too, if we have trusted Christ, have been given the joy of having Christ Jesus born in our hearts. Blessed among men and women are we. We deserve that privilege no more than Mary did, yet it is all by grace. And was not Elizabeth the most humble of all? To her was simply given the joy of having a part in drawing others to the Christ. What an honor. And that, too, Beloved, is an honor bestowed upon each of us.

So it can be said of Mary, "Blessed is she." It can be said of Elizabeth, "Blessed is she," as well. And it can be said of each of us, "Blessed are we." Blessed are we, indeed.

BLESSED IS SHE

"Blessed is she," Elizabeth said,
The Christ is alive in her womb.
Blessed was she and blessed are we
That Christ arose from the tomb.

And now He lives, He breathes, He walks.
And, oh, blessed Lord, I cry,
"That You should live inside of me,
And I can never die."

What joy, what peace, what power is mine,
In Christ I've been set free.
And blessed am I among men indeed,
For Jesus lives in me.

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Let us pray.

Our Father and our God,

Thank you that in eternity past You determined to write into the pages of Scripture the life of a woman named Elizabeth, a woman who when she was without hope, had faith. When the world gave her no reason to believe, she believed. And when the world gave her reason to be proud, she humbled herself and acknowledged that only One who mattered was the Coming One. Blessed is she indeed! And blessed are we Father, for Thou hast allowed the same Living Christ to be born in us. How can we leave this place unmindful of the awesomeness of that privilege? How can we take for granted the reality that God lives in us by grace? Father, if there be even one here today (or reading this lesson) who has not experienced the blessedness of the second birth, who has never allowed Christ Jesus to be born anew in their heart, I would pray that even this moment, the quiet touching of their hearts by Your Spirit would cause them to grieve over sin unconfessed and ask the Living Savior to be born anew, even this moment, that they might be born again. And may each of us, Father, leave this place like Elizabeth, leaping for joy in our spirits because Christ has been born in us.

In Jesus name. Amen.

A Challenge to Further Study

Write an essay this week, pretending that you are Elizabeth. Share the dreams and prayers you have had for a child. Share your feelings when Zechariah returned from the Temple and could not speak; when Mary came and you realized that your cousin would bear the one who was coming; when they wanted to name the child Zechariah. Make personal application.

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(09.07.17)