

TWO OLD PERSONS' LIFE OF FAITH

Luke 1:1-25

Key Verse: 1:6

"Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly."

Study Questions

1. What was Luke's motivation in compiling the gospel account? (1-4) Why were the birth, life and death of Jesus such epochal events in human and biblical history? (1-4)
2. In what respects was Zechariah's life of faith like a lamp burning in dark times? What shows the darkness of the times? Why were these two old people called upright? (5,6)
3. Describe Zechariah's encounter with the angel Gabriel. What does this event reveal about Zechariah's prayer life? (8-13)
4. Why was John called great before God? (14-17)
5. Why was Zechariah rebuked by the angel Gabriel? How did God train him and what was the purpose of the training? What was Elizabeth's confession of faith? What does this show about her faith?

The birth of John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah had been prophesied long ago (Is 40:3). At last, the prophecy was about to be fulfilled by the announcement concerning the birth of John the Baptist. In this passage, there is another story about two senior citizens who prepared the spiritual environment for the birth of John. They were Zechariah and Elizabeth. Today we learn about John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, and a little about John.

First, St. Luke's motivation in compiling the gospel account (1-4).

In the world, there are many autobiographies and biographies written by many in the hope that their achievements or their good deeds might be remembered by their descendants. But their lives and works impress us as sad and fatalistic instead of making us happy. In fact, they tried hard to survive and died sorrowfully.

But Jesus' story about his life and work marks a new era of human history. For example, BC changed into AD, Anno Domini--"in the year of our Lord." This indicates a historical landmark. In terms of bibliology, Jesus' life and work divide the Old Testament era and the New Testament era. What is astonishing, many have undertaken to draw up an account of Jesus' life and work. Their numbers, throughout the generations, are uncountable. But only four of them completed writing the story about Jesus' life and work. They are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. There is a story about a despotic king. The king wanted to rule his nation based on Chinese positivism. In order to maintain his policy, he killed 8,000 Christians. Once, after he became old, he said to his wife, "I want to grant one request to you, whatever it may be." Then the queen, who had been very faithful to the king, said very quietly, "I request your permission to receive baptism. I want to receive eternal salvation from sin and eternal life and the kingdom of God" (Jn 5:24). Then the king said, crying, "Your request is granted." Christian faith spread mainly to the servant-class as well as to the slave-class people. They heard Jesus' word that all men are equal in God. One slave asked a Christian evangelist, "If all human beings are equal, then are we slaves equal with the king?" "Yes, you are," the evangelist answered. Then the slave was happy to die for the sake of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus.

At that time, there was no written Bible book. Some people had Old Testament scrolls. But mostly, Jesus' story about his life and work and his words were handed down by word of mouth, mainly by his disciples, who were the eyewitnesses of God's work and the servants of God's word. Luke, the historian and evangelist, realized that this life-giving word of God must be spread to the whole world. So he assumed the task of compiling the story about Jesus' life and work, and Jesus' words. In doing so, he carefully investigated everything from the beginning and dedicated his gospel to Theophilus. The word "Theophilus" has the impression of an emperor or a king. But it is not. "Theophilus" means those who love God.

Second, Zechariah's life of faith (5-7).

The period from 40 BC to 4 BC was a time when King Herod ruled Judea (5), and it was a time of tragedy for the people of Israel. Herod was a puppet of the Roman Empire and an instrument of Satan. This Herod stran-

gled his two sons, suspecting that they would be his possible political opponents. What was worse, when he heard that the King of the Jews had been born, he became fearful, not knowing that he was a spiritual king. So in an attempt to kill the baby Jesus, he ordered all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under to be killed (Mt 2:16). "In the time of Herod," thus points to a period of tragedy in the history of Israel (16). The lamp of God seemed to have been extinguished. But it was not. There were still many devout people who were waiting for the coming of the Messiah. Among them, Zechariah and Elizabeth were a good example. Luke says they were upright before God. Why were they upright? Look at verse 6. "Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly." In other words, they studied the Bible diligently. Humanly speaking, Zechariah and Elizabeth were very fatalistic people because they had no child in their old age (7). But they were not victimized by fatalism because they believed in God through regular Bible study. Second, they were upright before God because, not only did they study the Bible, but also they lived up to the teachings of the Bible. One medical doctor was the only one who completed all the Bible study material assigned to the Chicago UBF leaders. The doctor was happy. The other day fellowship leaders were invited to a Christmas dinner. The doctor said, "I really want to bring my wife to the dinner." So his wife was invited to the dinner.

What then is the key point of the law of God? It is to love God wholeheartedly and to love our neighbor as ourself (Mk 12:30-31). Zechariah and Elizabeth loved God and they loved their neighbors in that dark generation. The townspeople may have said, "They have no fun, not even a goat." But they really liked Zechariah and Elizabeth as their parents. Zechariah and Elizabeth were happy all the time because they had God in their hearts. The townspeople were happy whenever they saw Zechariah and Elizabeth. Compared with the great military power of the Roman Empire, these two old persons' life of faith seemed to be unimportant. But to God, these two old persons' life of faith was more powerful than the military power of Rome. And they were the lamp of God, and the whole church of God.

Third, Zechariah's life of prayer (8-13).

In the ancient Jewish world, many thousands of priests wanted to have the privilege of burning incense in the temple, and most of them died

without enjoying the privilege. But Zechariah was chosen by fortune to carry out the priestly duty in the temple (8,9). It was a great day in his life. Insomuch as he was thrilled with the privilege, he was obliged to pray for his people, calling their names one by one. When Zechariah was alone in the temple burning incense, an angel of the Lord appeared (11). When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear (12), for the Hebrew people thought that they would die if they saw God with their own eyes. This might be one reason why he was afraid. Still, there was another reason. Look at verse 13. "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.'" While he should have been praying for his people and his nation as his priestly duty, Zechariah did not pray for the people, but he prayed for himself, saying, "O Lord, give me a son!" Zechariah did not mean to pray for himself. But his habit of praying for a son to be given him was habitually repeated. Thus he revealed the basic selfishness of humankind. And Zechariah's performance of priestly duty was not excellent. However, we cannot deny the fact that Zechariah prayed. We are greatly inspired by Zechariah to have a hope of raising 10,000 young American Bible teachers through selfish people's prayer.

Maybe Zechariah began to pray for a son after 10 months of married life. Then he prayed for a son for three years, but when he looked at his wife's stomach, he saw no sign. He prayed another three years and looked at her. Still, he saw no sign. In this way, he must have prayed for a son all his lifetime. Prayer is a measure of faith. Even though he lived in an unbelieving generation, he was a man of prayer. It is interesting to know that Zechariah had one prayer topic all his lifetime. By nature, human beings are forgetful. If people were not forgetful, they would die because of all the unhappy memories of the past. In his wisdom, God made men forgetful. So we don't have to worry that we are forgetful. But Zechariah never forgot his one prayer topic all his lifetime, for a son to be given him. God used this man of prayer as the father of John the Baptist. This part reminds us of Mark 11:24. It says, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

It is important to know that God uses praying people. To the eyes of worldly people, Zechariah in the temple burning incense and the crowd of people praying outside looked like a handful of mountain goats. But in God's sight, these praying people were main members in God's history,

and God was ruling the world through them.

Fourth, John is great before God because God chose him (14-17).

Verse 14 says that John's birth would bring great joy to his mother and to his father and to all the neighbors. Why? It was because he was born in the providence of God. The angel said to Zechariah, "You are to give him the name John." The name John means, "gracious gift of God." God chose John as the forerunner of Jesus. So John was great because he was chosen by God to do the work of God. Some people act as if they are doing God a favor when they do something for God. We must know that we did not choose God. God chose us. John 15:16 says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit...." John is great because he was chosen as the forerunner of the Messiah.

John is great before God because he lived a pure life. Look at verse 15b. "He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth." John lived a pure life before God against the corrupt worldly way of life. In order to live a pure life, he did not take wine or other fermented drink. In most cases, drinking was the starting point of all the evil-doings. When John lived a pure life before God, people said, "He is demon-possessed. He is not corrupt like one of us" (Mt 11:18). He slept in crevices of rocks. He ate locusts and wild honey. When he lived a pure life, God gave mighty powerful spirit to him. At that time, the world was immoral and violent. As we know well, corruption makes a man utterly powerless to do anything. But when John lived a pure life, God gave him spirit and power in his inner man.

John is great before God because he had God's holy mission. John was sent to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. His mission was to preach the message of repentance to all kinds of people (16,17). In time past and present, people are proud because of their sins. So they hate most to hear the word, "repent." John was appointed to carry out the mission of preaching the message of repentance. For this, John rebuked people's corruption and perversion. John rebuked many runaway fathers to repent and come back to their children. He rebuked disobedient children to repent and live in the wisdom of God. His life of mission ended with imprisonment and martyrdom. But the Bible history says that he was not a victim of the vicious cycles of the world, but that he was a great man in the sight

of God.

John is great before God because he is a man of spirit. What was his source of power as a man of God? John was like a reincarnation of the prophet Elijah (17). He came in an epoch similar to that in which Elijah had lived. In the time of Elijah the prophet, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel ruled Israel. No one dared to rebuke King Ahab and Queen Jezebel's wickedness. But Elijah, a man of God's Spirit, rebuked them to repent their wickedness. Likewise, John, a man with God's Spirit, rebuked Herod the tetrarch to repent of his sin of adultery (Mk 6:18), even though Herod the tetrarch was a most cruel man who could kill anybody, anytime. John's power to rebuke came from the Spirit of God (17). A nation's power does not depend on the size of its highways. It depends on the spiritual condition of its people.

Fifth, God trains Zechariah (18-25).

The angel's message to Zechariah was God's promise to give him a son. In his embarrassment, Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years" (18). He was a man of prayer. He had faith in God's sovereign rule in history. But when his prayer was answered, 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 now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words..." (19,20). Though Zechariah had received enough training through his childless situation, he needed more training in order to have faith in God's words. For this, God gave him dumb training--training not to speak unbelieving words for nine months. When Zechariah came out to the people, suddenly he became a pantomime artist; he tried to speak with sign language. The multitude waiting outside did not know what had happened inside the temple. So the people assumed that he had seen a vision. The interpretation was better than the dream. Anyway, God was training John's father in preparation for the birth of John.

After this, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. Through five months of seclusion, she came to the conclusion that God is almighty, and said, "The Lord has done this for me"

(25). We also must experience God's mighty work in us until we can confess, "The Lord has done this for me."

Zechariah and Elizabeth were upright in the sight of God. In other words, these two old persons studied the Bible diligently in that dark generation and loved God wholeheartedly. They also loved their neighbor as themselves. May God help us to study the Bible diligently and love God and our neighbors wholeheartedly.