

What is the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth?

Zechariah (also called Zacharias or Zachariah) was a priest from the tribe of Levi who served the Lord during the reign of Herod in Judea. Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, was also a descendant of Aaron, and the Bible says they were godly, devout people (Luke 1:5-6). When the Bible begins their story, they are both old and childless (verse 7), although they had prayed for children.

Luke 1:8-9 records that it was Zechariah's turn to enter the temple and burn incense as part of his priestly duties. This was a once-in-a-lifetime honor. While Zechariah was in the holy place, the angel Gabriel appeared to him "standing at the right side of the altar of incense" (verse 11). Gabriel told Zechariah that his prayers had been answered. God had chosen him and Elizabeth to bear a son who would be the forerunner of the promised Messiah (verses 13-17). They were to name him John, and he would be filled with the Holy Spirit and dedicated to the Lord's service even before birth.

But Zechariah doubted the angel's words, and he reminded Gabriel, "I am an old man and my wife is well along in years" (Luke 1:18). Because of his lack of faith, Zechariah was struck mute until the time when his son would be born (verse 20). When Zechariah exited the temple, he stood before the crowd unable to speak. From his gestures, the people understood that he had seen a vision while in the temple (verse 22).

Zechariah returned home, and Elizabeth became pregnant, just as the angel had said. When she was in her sixth month, the angel Gabriel also appeared to Mary, her relative, and told Mary that she would be the mother of the Messiah, Jesus (Luke 1:30-31). Mary went right away to spend time with Elizabeth, where she received further confirmation of the angel's words: at the sound of Mary's voice, the baby John leaped in Elizabeth's womb

(verse 41). Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she said to Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! . . . Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!” (verses 42 and 45).

When Elizabeth gave birth to her son, the friends and relatives assumed he would be named after his father, Zechariah. But Zechariah made motions asking for writing tools, and when he received them he wrote, “His name is John” (Luke 1:63). Immediately, Zechariah was able to speak again, and he praised God for His redemption (verse 68), for His faithfulness to His promises (verses 69–73), and for His salvation (verse 74). Zechariah then prophesied concerning his son, John: “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” (verse 76). Zechariah closed out his inspired utterance by returning to the messianic theme, praising God for His “tender mercy” and anticipating the Christ: “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” (verses 78–79).

Zechariah and Elizabeth’s baby grew up to be the man we know as John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1). The repentance John preached prepared people’s hearts for faith in Jesus Christ.