

## THE HOUSE CHURCH OF ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH

Luke 1:1-25

Key verse 1:6

"Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly."

Today we celebrate the 2nd of Advent, translated "the coming": namely, the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary as a human child and humbly came into the world in a stable of animals to save us wretched sinners and reconcile us to God. But Advent is not only a waiting for Jesus' annual birthday celebration with abundant gifts, but also an expectation of his renewed glorious return, where he will judge the living and the dead. In this respect, it is also a time of repentance, where we must ask ourselves if we could stand in the judgment of Christ if he came again today. The house church of Zechariah and Elizabeth, whom we are privileged to know today, give us an ideal example of how to await the coming of the Lord. They walked blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord, holding fast to the promise of God regardless of their circumstances. They were a burning lamp of God in a dark time and could be used preciously as forerunners for the coming of Christ. God help us to hold fast to the Word of God, to His promise and to prayer, and like Zechariah, Elizabeth and John, to be pioneers for spiritual revival in this generation.

### 1. The pious and blameless life in all the commands (1-7)

First, an excellent biblical scholar, Luke (1-4).

Let's look at verses 1 and 2: "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." The evangelist Luke wrote his Gospel around the year 65 A.D. He was a physician by profession and traveled from Troas with Apostle Paul for about 17 years. During this time he must have met the recipient of his Gospel, Theophilus a highly placed Roman. The latter had presumably come to faith through Apostle Paul and expressed to Luke his desire to receive an in-depth and reliable account of the history of Christianity from its earliest beginnings to the present. The resulting Gospel of Luke, however, did not become a private reading of a single person, but a testimony of the life and work of Jesus Christ for everyone who can call himself a "Theophilus," that is, a God-loving person.

Let's read verses 3 and 4 together: "With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." Luke was very precise because of his profession. He emphasizes that he explored everything very carefully in order to write it down in good order, so that

you might learn the sure ground of the doctrine of Jesus Christ. He explored everything with care and did not rely on rumors or opinions. Our faith is not based on a nice feeling, nor is faith a vague matter. Faith is based on historical facts. This is all the more important because today we live in a time when the Word of God is often relativized or reinterpreted.

Only in the Gospel of Luke do we get to know Zacharias and Elizabeth. This elderly, nondescript couple was quite ordinary to most people. Probably the most striking thing about them, was their childlessness, which did not speak well for them. But in God's sight, these two were very special and He wanted to use them as the main characters in His plan of salvation for His people. Luke, with his empathetic nature, recognized this and begins his Gospel by introducing this special house church as a burning lamp of God in a dark, almost godless time. Our Next Generation is also a burning lamp of God in a dark time: they are blessed to study the Word of God with their parents and Bible teachers from their infancy and youth, and to lay the firm foundation for an influential life of faith. May God use them in this Advent and Christmas season, like Luke, as influential Bible teachers who minister the Word of God to their friends and sheep by forming one-to-one Bible study teams. Then young people will come to know the deep meaning of Jesus' incarnation and form a relationship of life and love with Him.

We learn in this passage from Luke to search deeply into the Word of God and thus stand on the sure ground of the Word of God. May God use us as preachers of the good news of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in these relativistic times stand firmly on the Word of God and rightly distribute the Word of truth according to the Bible.

Second: Pious before God in all commands and decrees (5-7).

Let's look at verse 5: "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." The "time of Herod" represents a dark and gloomy time. For 400 years, according to the prophet Malachi, there had been no more revelation from God. Many among the people thought that God had forgotten and abandoned them. The Romans occupied the land and King Herod ruled under the protection of the Roman Emperor Augustus. He had great buildings erected, but at the same time he lived in great fear of competitors and possible intriguers. Out of this fear and obsession with power, he had several of his relatives murdered in cold blood.

But there were also people who resisted the darkness of that time by living a pious and righteous life and waiting for the promised Messiah. The priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were just such persons. Zechariah came from the priestly family of Abijah. His lineage was the eighth of 24 divisions once appointed to the priestly ministry under King David (1 Chronicles 24:10). What do we learn about Zechariah and Elizabeth? Let's read lead verse 6 together: "Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly." They were not discouraged by the darkness of that time. The Word of God was alive in their lives and the expectation of the coming Messiah burned in their hearts. Thus, they waited with faith and confidence for the soon coming of the Savior. This joyful expectation made them overcome even their greatest personal problem. As verse 7 tells us, this was their childlessness. Like Abram and Sarai, Zechariah and Elizabeth were aged and childless. Yet their situation did not make them bitter or despairing - they continued to be pious and blameless before the Lord. Unlike Sarai and Abram, they did not try to approach the problem with a rational, human solution, but entrusted this matter entirely to God. They also never abandoned this prayer request because they were convinced of God's omnipotence. Humanly speaking, they could

have given up their prayer for a descendant long ago. But this prayer accompanied them until old age. They did not pray to have an "ordinary" son, but they prayed with the promise of God. Perhaps with Isaiah 40:3, that God would let the forerunner of the Messiah come into the world through them: "A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

From Zechariah and Elizabeth we can learn the pious, God-fearing life. They lived blamelessly in all the commands and decrees of the Lord. Instead of compromising with the spirit of the time, the word of God's promise was alive in their hearts. They searched the Scriptures with joy and pondered them day and night. They formed a vessel of prayer in their home church and invited their neighbors and friends to study the Bible together. From the Word of God they received strength, comfort and encouragement. Thus, despite their situation, they were able to look to the almighty and living God. As the psalmist describes, "I lift up my eyes to the mountains - where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth." (Psalm 121:1-2). "...so our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he shows us his mercy." (Psalm 123:2b).

Zechariah and Elizabeth also encourage me to establish a devout, prayerful and blameless house church that holds fast to God's promise (Genesis 15:5,6; John 12:24) in all circumstances. I can learn here what kind of people God uses to write His history. It is not the people who are in the public eye and/or are particularly powerful. It is the inconspicuous people who swim against the zeitgeist, and build their lives entirely on God, come what may. They are the people who give God all the glory, because they know that everything comes from God and who do not try to become great among people and make a name for themselves. Zechariah and Elizabeth struggled with the Word of God, but not with people, and so they were also able to have a positive influ-

ence on the members of their church. It is precisely these unassuming people that God uses as the main characters in his salvation story and Luke understood this with his fine sense.

We live today in a time similar to that of Zechariah and Elizabeth, a spiritually dark time. Humanism says: "We don't need God. Man is good and we can do it with our own strength." Relativism relativizes the Word of God, claiming, "The Bible is open to interpretation in many ways and must not be taken literally." Materialism says, "If you are rich, you have power. Money alone can make you happy and free." And genderism turns God's creation order upside down and destroys the biblical image of the family. When we see the darkness of these times, we can easily despair or become discouraged. But we learn from Zechariah and Elizabeth which house church God used preciously in His history: namely, the one that was pious before God, that lived blamelessly in all the commands and decrees of the Lord, and that exercised great spiritual influence on John and even on Mary, the mother of Jesus. Let us follow the example of this house church by holding on to the promise of God, especially our common key verse from Ezekiel 37:10, and prepare the pioneering of all faculties and the installation of one Abraham and one Sarah of faith and 12 disciples of Jesus each at the University of Bonn, the University of Koblenz, the University of Applied Sciences Bonn/Rhein-Sieg and all 1700 universities in Europe and the Muslim world.

## **2. The Prayer Life of Zechariah and Elizabeth (8-25)**

Let's look at verses 8 and 9: "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." A very special day came for Zechariah. By lot he had been appointed to perform the priestly service in the temple. He purified himself, put on the solemn priestly garments, and went into the

sanctuary of the Lord. There on the left was the golden lampstand and on the right the table with the shewbread. In the middle between them was the altar of incense. As Zechariah was lightening the incense there and the people were praying outside, the angel of God suddenly appeared to him. Zechariah was terrified and fear came over him (12). Let's read verse 13 together, "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 call him John." The angel's glad tidings to Zechariah were, "Your prayer is heard!" God answered Zechariah's persistent prayer for a son in his time. As with Abraham and Sarah, God first trained and then abundantly blessed this house church. God uses people who build their lives entirely on His counsel and do not doubt in their hearts that He has already prepared the best plan for their lives, regardless of what blows of fate one has already had to experience. 1. God is favorable to us if we are on His side and 2. with God everything is possible - we may internalize these two principles in our lives in order to truly live a blessed life.

We experience daily that God blesses our prayer in the morning. Our co-workers gather at the crack of dawn in the house of God to raise the altar of prayer for Germany, Europe and for the Muslim countries. They are praying to form 10,000 one-to-one Bible study teams to prepare for spiritual renewal and revival in Europe. So God has also already answered Warmherz's prayer among the students in the Juridicum to raise up a faithful Chancellor as a fruit of prayer - in His time. God has also blessed our prayer for the two freshmen Joshua and Samuel Abraham. In their early youth, no one could have hope for them: Joshua was recommended for special education and Samuel Abraham had an incurable tic problem, according to Dr. Google. However, through their intense spiritual preparation for their baptism in prayer and Bible study, they were truly filled with God's Spirit and were able to win the victory of faith in their high school graduation and are now growing into

the influential spiritual leaders and royal priests among Bonn students. So Joshua was also able to preach by the Holy Spirit this morning without using a manuscript. God has also already answered our prayers for Sarah Schweitzer and Peter Kösters, who will be able to follow them next year and each celebrate their faith victory in the Abitur.

There is a saying that goes, "Prayer is not everything; but without prayer, everything is nothing." Prayer is the most important thing in our faith life. Prayer is also an expression of our faith. Those who pray experience God's mighty working in their lives. Those who pray may, by faith, challenge the darkness of this age and experience God's working through His Word. Missionary Sarah Chang prayed for her two sons from birth that they would one day study at Bonn University and be shepherds for that university. God answered her unanswered prayer by having them both successfully study medicine in Bonn and now work with their house churches as pioneers in opening up the medical school. God will also bless Missionary Sarah's unceasing prayer for the establishment of 12 mothers of faith at each faculty to the end and fulfill it in His time.

Let us look at what the angel of God promised about John the Baptist. Let us read 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 before he is born. 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 parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." The angel promised Zechariah that his son John would be great in the sight of the Lord. His greatness, however, was not to be reflected in political or worldly power, but in a pure life totally consecrated to God. His greatness was his

burning shepherd's heart for his people, for whom he preached repentance in the wilderness and baptized them with water as a sign of their repentance. His greatness was that he kept his purity before God by not drinking alcohol or partying. His greatness was that he remained humble and instead of seeking his own glory, he sought only to make Jesus great: "He must increase; but I must decrease!" (John 3:30).

The name John means: "In whom the grace", or: "The grace of the Lord". This name indicates, first, that grace was shown to the parents because a son was born to them in their old age; likewise, that grace was shown to John himself because he would be great in the sight of the Lord; lastly, that grace was also shown to the people of God because he would turn them to God. It also falls that his parents were not chosen at random. Zechariah and Elizabeth, in a sense, had already begun John's mission by being a burning lamp of God in those dark times and a spiritual example for their fellow men, just as John would later be. God had to choose suitable parents for John, the forerunner of Jesus, so that he could also grow up to be that. Without the spiritual example of his parents and the appropriate upbringing, he would not have been able to fulfill his destiny and instead would have grown up to be just an ordinary boy, raised by his parents as a spoiled prince who would never have known humble life before God. God chooses His "History Makers" very deliberately because He knows each of us personally, with all our strengths and weaknesses, and tailors His promise for our lives accordingly.

God also wants to use our Next Generation as trailblazers and main characters of His salvation history. This one has received a great spiritual inheritance through the faith of their parents and the servants of God. They are blessed, like John the Baptist, to be pioneers for the spiritual renewal and revival of Europe in God's salvation history according to their dispositions and talents.

Let's look at how Zechariah responded to the angel's words. Verse 18 says, "Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." Despite his persistent prayer for an offspring, Zechariah doubted the promise at the moment it was made. Probably his prayer had already become a habit to him and the faith in its fulfillment dwindled with him with the time. Probably he was also overwhelmed and disturbed by the appearance of the angel and could not quite believe what was happening to him. But God is alive and we should always expect his presence or revelation. If we pray persistently but do not believe in our hearts that our prayers will actually be answered, then they are null and void. The basis for praying is faith, as it is written in Mark 11:23-24, "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." God hears our prayers, but He looks less at our words than at our hearts. Humanly, we can understand Zechariah's reaction. Perhaps you have also prayed for a long time with one intention. Many have prayed for their campus for years. If God promises you with Ezekiel 37:10 that dead bones will come to life through His word, then you may absolutely believe that God will bless your Bible study with the students and raise up disciples and followers of Jesus through you. Sometimes God answers a prayer immediately; or, as with Zechariah and Elizabeth, only after a long time. Sometimes we see the fulfillment with our own eyes; sometimes only our children or our children's children. God desires that we not only believe hypothetically in the fulfillment of our prayer requests, but that we, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, live by faith, devoutly before God, and believe absolutely in the work of God in the revival of Europe according to His promise. Then we may also personally experience God raising up 100,000 Bible teachers and sending them out as missionaries to all countries by the year 2041.

Let us look at verses 19 and 20: "The angel said to 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 appointed time." God reminded Zechariah that He is Almighty God with whom nothing is impossible, and He gave him the muteness training during Elizabeth's pregnancy so that he could take this point very personally. Zechariah eventually had to pass on this faith, beyond all doubt, to his promised son John as well. We may always bring our prayer to God with the confidence of its fulfillment and thus also move any mountains. Nothing is impossible with God, and accordingly nothing is impossible to him who believes.

Let us repent of our unbelief, calculation and false expectation, and personally learn to respond faithfully to the promise God gives us in His Word. We may look at our children, sheep and friends with the eyes of faith and see how God will use them very precious, like John, as forerunners of Christ's return. - By forming 10,000 one-to-one Bible study teams, we may be pioneers like Zechariah and Elizabeth, prophesying God's words to young people so that spiritually dead bones will come alive and be raised up into God's exceedingly great army for world mission.

Let us also read verses 24.25: "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." Elizabeth withdrew from public life for five months in order to have deep communion with God in devout silence and to understand more deeply the greatness of His promise. The more she pondered, the more deeply she recognized and confessed, "The LORD has done this for me!" Childlessness at that time was interpreted as God's pun-

ishment. The disgrace she had endured up to that point must have hurt her personally, and she may have often wondered why such a thing had to happen to her household, even though they lived blamelessly before God. However, her confidence in God's counsel always outweighed her doubts, since she did not rebel against God and did not back down from her decision to build her life with Zechariah on God's Word. She feared God more than she feared men. The humiliation among men was certainly something oppressive, but she never forgot or relativized God's grace in her life because of it. God does not make us suffer for no reason, but trains us so that His works in us can be revealed.

Sometimes it is hard for us to see God's hope for our lives because we cannot see any hope for ourselves. Currently, I am an aged philosopher, unemployed and childless, living in the day. Who could have hope for me? I can learn here that for God, unlike for most people, these circumstances are void. For God, the only thing that counts is that I build my life on His sovereign counsel, live devoutly before Him, keep His commandments and decrees blamelessly, and fear Him more than men. If I give Jesus the foremost place in my heart and sacrifice my Isaacs and cast out Ishmaels, then God can and will also use me as the main person in His work of salvation. God is training me, a spoiled individual son, so that His works may be revealed in me. (John 9:3) I am allowed to know here one more time God's omnipotence and His sovereign rule over history and that nothing is impossible with Him. With this knowledge and mountain-shifting faith, I may see myself with the hope of God instead of the hopelessness of human judgment. I have my destiny in my own hands: not by being able to fundamentally change my circumstances with my own strength, but by building my life on the counsel of God, giving Him all glory in the first place through my life, and holding fast to His promise that He wants to use me abundantly as a blessing. If I do not doubt this promise in my heart, God will also fulfill it in His time.

Today, through Zechariah and Elizabeth, we have come to know the model of an influential, devout house church. God preciously used them as pioneers and blessed their unceasing prayer. God uses devout, praying house churches in a dark godless time as the main characters of His redemptive story. The house church of Zechariah and Elizabeth encourages us to hold fast to the Word of God and be a burning lamp of God for the spiritual renewal and revival of our generation. May God especially bless our Next Generation, like Zechariah, Elizabeth and John, to be trailblazers and protagonists of God's story. Let us hold on to Ezekiel 37:10 and experience that God is making Germany and Europe alive through the power of God's Word and raising up young people to be an exceedingly great army of Bible teachers and trailblazers.