

# PRECEDING JESUS' BIRTH

Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:5-80

## STRUCTURE

**Key-persons:** Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary; Joseph

**Key-location:** Nazareth

**Key-repetitions:**

- Angels: The Angel Gabriel visited Zechariah (Lk 1:11-20) and Mary (Lk 1:26-38). An angel appeared to Joseph (Mt 1:20-24).
- People were afraid of the angels, but the angels told them not to fear (Lk 1:11-13; 1:26-30).
- Holy Spirit (Mt 1:18, 20; Lk 1:15, 35, 41, 67).
- Mary was a virgin and became pregnant by the Holy Spirit (Mt 1:18, 20, 25; Lk 1:27, 31, 34-35).
- Expressions of praise to God were manifested by Mary (Lk 1:49-55); Zechariah (Lk 1:68-79).
- Predictions: Elizabeth would have a son (Lk 1:13); predictions about the son John (Lk 1:13-17; 2:76-79); Mary would become pregnant (Lk 1:31); predictions about Jesus (Lk 1:32-33; Mt 1:21); Mary would be called blessed (Lk 1:48).

**Key-attitudes:**

- The fear of Zechariah and Mary when an angel appeared before them.
- Zechariah's doubt when the Angel Gabriel promised him a son.
- Elizabeth's joy at becoming pregnant and having a baby.
- The surprise and curiosity of Zechariah's neighbors after the birth of John.
- The goodness of Joseph.
- The worship of God by Mary and Zechariah.

- The acceptance of God's will by Zechariah, Mary and Joseph.

**Initial-situation:**

After the end of the events recorded in the Old Testament, about four hundred years had passed without God's sending a prophet. Malachi was the last Old Testament prophet through whom God had spoken.

At the beginning of the events recorded in the New Testament, the Romans dominated the world. In Judea, Herod the Great was king of the Jews. The Roman army protected him and forced the Jews to accept him as king. Most of the Jews frequented the Temple and offered sacrifices, though few awaited the arrival of the promised Savior. Few remembered or believed God's promises given to Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, nor the prophets concerning the Promised One.

Those who remembered and longed for the Promised One, expected him to lead a political revolution which would conquer the Romans and make Israel a powerful nation.

**Initial-problem:**

After four hundred years of God not sending a prophet or visiting his people in a special way, an angel appeared to Zechariah with a message from God.

**Final-situation:**

An angel told Joseph to marry Mary, that God's Holy Spirit made Mary pregnant and that the baby was to be named Jesus. Joseph took Mary as his wife but did not have intercourse with her until she gave birth to the baby.

## BIBLE STORY

### John the Baptist's Birth Announced

Herod was king of Judea when there was a priest named Zechariah who was married to Elizabeth. Her father was a priest. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth behaved in a manner which God considered good. They were careful to observe all the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth could never conceive. Now both of them were very old (Lk 1:5-7).

One day Zechariah's division of priests were on duty and he was serving as priest. He was chosen to enter the Lord's Temple and burn incense (Lk 1:8-10).

Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared. Zechariah saw him and was terrified! The angel calmed him, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard by God. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. You will name him John. He will herald the Lord's arrival in the style and power of Elijah. He will make peace between fathers and their children. He will turn the hardened skeptics back to the right way of thinking about God. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord."

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is an old woman."

The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in God's presence. God sent me to bring you this good news. You didn't believe me; therefore, you will be unable to speak until the day of your son's birth. Every word I've spoken will come true at the proper time."

Zechariah came out of the Temple and was unable to speak. He used sign language.

Zechariah completed his time of priestly service and returned home. His wife Elizabeth became pregnant and remained in seclusion for five months. She said, "The Lord did this for me. My people were ashamed of me because I had no children, but the Lord has taken away my disgrace among the people" (Lk 1:11-25).

### **Gabriel Announced Birth of Jesus to Mary**

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to marry a man named Joseph, a descendant from King David. The angel told Mary, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

The angel's words confused Mary. The angel assured her, "Don't be afraid, Mary, God is pleased with you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son. You will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will rule over the people of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

Mary asked the angel, "How will this happen? I am a virgin!"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you. The power of the Most High will cover you. So the baby will be holy. He will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a baby in her old age. Everyone called her barren; yet she is six months pregnant! Nothing is impossible with God."

Mary answered, "I am the Lord's servant girl. May this happen to me just as you say." Then the angel went away (Lk 1:26-38).

### **Mary Visited Elizabeth**

Mary got ready and quickly hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby jumped in her womb. Then Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She shouted out, "God has blessed you more than other women, and God has blessed the child you will bear! But why am I so blessed, that the mother of my Lord visits me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who believed what the Lord said to her will come true!"

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home (Lk 1:39-56).

### **The Birth of John the Baptist**

When Elizabeth was full-term in her pregnancy, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard how good the Lord was to her and they celebrated with her.

When the baby was eight days old, they came to circumcise him. They wanted to name him Zechariah, after his father. His mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."

They argued, "But, none of your relatives has that name."

They made signs to the baby's father, asking him what he wanted to name the child. Zechariah asked for a writing tablet. To everyone's surprise he wrote, "His name is John!" Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue loosed, and he began to speak, praising God.

The child grew and lived in the desert until he came out to preach to Israel (Lk 1:57-80).

### **An Angel Announces the Birth of Jesus to Joseph**

Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph. It was the Jewish custom that an engagement involved a commitment that could only be dissolved through divorce. Normally, the engagement lasted for a year. Before Mary and Joseph went through the marriage ceremony; before they had sexual intercourse, Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant. She was pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit, but Joseph didn't know that. Joseph always did what was right. He did not want to disgrace Mary in public, so he planned to divorce her quietly. Jewish custom gave Joseph a choice about how he could divorce Mary. He could take Mary to a public square and publicly accuse her of being an adulteress, or he could write out a letter of divorce and deliver it to Mary in the presence of two witnesses. Joseph planned to divorce her quietly.

While he thought about this, an angel of the Lord came to him in a dream. The angel said, "Joseph, descendant of David, do not be afraid to marry Mary. God's Holy Spirit made her pregnant. She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus. The name Jesus means 'God Saves'. Give him that name because he will save his people from their sins. This took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet, 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (*quotation from Isa 7:14*). Immanuel is Hebrew for, 'God is with us.'"

Joseph woke up and obeyed the Lord's angel. He took Mary home as his wife but did not consummate the marriage with sexual intercourse until she gave birth to the baby (Mt 1:18-25).

## **GENERIC DIALOGUE QUESTIONS**

1. What catches your attention in the story?
2. Is there anything in the story that is hard to understand?
3. Who are the main characters in the story?
4. What problems did the characters face?
5. How did the characters face their problems?
6. How have you faced similar problems?
7. Is there someone in the story who is similar to you or who is different from you?
8. What does the story tell about God?

## **SPECIFIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. How were the angles involved in the events preceding Jesus' birth?
2. Who were some of the people involved in the events preceding Jesus' birth?
3. How were Zechariah's doubts different from Mary's?
4. What events surrounded the birth of Zechariah and Elizabeth's son John?
5. How did Mary become pregnant with Jesus if she had never had sex with a man?

## **LIFE-LESSONS**

1. God always keeps his promise even though sometimes there are delays. Abraham was the father of the nation of Israel. Before Abraham went to Canaan, God promised him that all people would be blessed through his descendant (Gn 12:3; Lk 1:72-75). Thousands of years had passed since God had made that promise to Abraham; however, God had not forgotten; he did what he promised.

2. Jesus was conceived for the purpose of saving people from punishment for their sins. The angel informed Joseph that Jesus would save the people from their sins (Mt 1:21-23).
3. Several circumstances made Mary's pregnancy a supernatural event:
  - 3.1 Jesus' birth was predicted by Old Testament prophets (Is 7:14, 9:6-7; Mic 5:2).
  - 3.2 An angel prophesied Jesus' birth (Lk 1:30-33; Mt 1:20-21).
  - 3.3 Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:35; Mt 1:20).
  - 3.4 Mary was still a virgin when she became pregnant, and when she gave birth to Jesus (Lk 1:28-38; Mt 1:24-25).
4. God communicates with people. God's angel spoke to Zechariah (Lk 1:8-20), Mary (Lk 1:26-38) and Joseph (Mt 1:20-21). Zechariah prophesied that his son John would be a prophet who would prepare Israel for the coming of the Savior (Lk 1:76).
5. God is omnipotent. He has the power to do whatever he wills. For God, nothing is impossible (Lk 1:37). God made an elderly couple, where the wife was sterile, have a son (Lk 1:5-25), he made a virgin become pregnant (Lk 1:26-38) and he made Joseph, a confused man, understand his will (Mt 1:18-24).