

## **Luke 1:13-15a, 18, 24-25, 57**

<sup>13</sup>But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son for you, and you are to name him John. <sup>14</sup>You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup>because he will be great in the sight of the Lord.

<sup>18</sup>Zechariah said to the angel, “How can I be sure of this, because I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years?”

<sup>24</sup>After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived. She kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying, <sup>25</sup>“The Lord has done this for me in the days when he looked with favor on me and took away my disgrace among the people.”

<sup>57</sup>When the time came for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son.

## **Advent Expectation**

### **I.**

It was too quiet in the house. Elizabeth was all alone. She had been married for many years, but her husband was a priest and it was his time to serve. He had left home for a while to go to the temple for his duties. She was used to it. Her father was also a priest who had done the same thing. Still, she was all alone.

Other women might have children or grandchildren to keep them company at home, but not Elizabeth. Apparently, that blessing was not to be hers. She had accepted that, but still she wondered what would happen in her later years.

In the ancient world, children were the support system. They were the Social Security—the retirement fund. Elizabeth didn’t have that safety net. Nor did she have the joy of spending time with her children.

In those days, having no children was seen as a curse. I wonder how Elizabeth and Zechariah struggled with their infertility. I wonder how often Elizabeth prayed to the Lord to bless her with a child. Did she cry out with anguish, or was she just resigned to the sad fact that she would never be a mother? She probably prayed much like Hannah had done before the birth of Samuel centuries earlier.

One thing we *do* know: Elizabeth didn’t give in to bitterness or anger. Luke describes her as upright. We heard that last week when we spoke about Zechariah. Both of them were described as righteous before God. Elizabeth simply lived her life in faithfulness to God. She didn’t let disappointment dominate her life, but it does seem she had given up. Both she and Zechariah seemed resigned to the fact that they were too old to have children. It just wasn’t realistic.

“When the days of his priestly service were completed, [Zechariah] went back to his home” (Luke 1:23, EHV). Elizabeth was anticipating her husband’s return. She probably tidied the house and fixed a nice meal. After days of being alone, she was ready for some conversation. But when he returned, she realized something had happened. He couldn’t speak. He seemed exited about something and made gestures to try to explain, but she couldn’t make sense of what he was trying to say. At least he was home.

“After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived” (Luke 1:24, EHV). Can you imagine her surprise when shortly after this she was pregnant? Perhaps for a while she thought she must be imagining it. Perhaps she had come down with a touch of something, or had eaten something that disagreed with her. Why, then, did Zechariah seem so delighted? Why was he spending more time than usual in prayer? In time she understood. Against all odds, she

was carrying a child.

“She kept herself in seclusion for five months” (Luke 1:24, EHV). Why did she stay away from other people so long? Maybe it was to devote herself to spiritual reflection. Perhaps it was so that she wouldn’t have to explain over and over again. Maybe she was waiting to make sure nothing happened. In her heart she knew. The Lord had done this. He had taken away the thing that caused others to look down on her.

“In those days Mary got up and hurried to the hill country, to a town of Judah. <sup>40</sup>She entered the home of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth” (Luke 1:39-40, EHV). The visit of Mary to her home is when Elizabeth broke her seclusion. Mary was pregnant, too.

“Just as Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup>She called out with a loud voice and said, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! <sup>43</sup>But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:41-43, EHV). *Both* Elizabeth and the baby in her womb were filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth prophesied that Mary and her baby were blessed; she proclaimed the truth the Mary was the mother of the Lord—the Messiah. Through it all, Elizabeth learned that human expectations are often faulty, but God’s gifts exceed all human expectations.

## II.

What are you expecting for Christmas? Advertisers spend lots of time and money this time of year, trying to convince people to want their products and request them as gifts from their loved ones. If we buy in to the hype, we are disappointed when we don’t get what we want.

Some are disappointed by not getting the perfect gift, but others are disappointed because they put their hope in other people. They think *this* year will be different. All the relatives will behave themselves at the family gatherings. What happens when the expectations aren’t met? What happens when other people fail again and again?

Perhaps this year you are expecting something different from yourself. This Christmas you’ll stay within your budget. This year you’ll stick to your diet around all the holiday meals. This year you won’t give in to any temptations surrounding Christmas and New Years celebrations. How will all that turn out?

What we really should be thinking about are spiritual things. What do we expect from *God*? Are those expectations proper? Are they in line with his will, or are we looking for something different?

## III.

When you think about all those expectations, we might become like Elizabeth. We might be willing to settle for the expected. I don’t want to be disappointed, so I will set my sights low. The less I expect from myself and others—and even from God—the happier I may be.

That might even be commendable. If that reflects contentment and satisfaction with whatever God chooses to bless us with, that’s a godly attitude. Often, however, it comes with a built-in disappointment. I’m expecting to be disappointed, so I’ll be a little less depressed the whole time rather than shocked when it all happens. If your expectations are not grounded in reality, or if they are unreasonable, that kind of pragmatic attitude makes sense.

Are you just giving in? Are you settling for mediocrity, for disappointment, for failure, when you don’t have to?

## IV.

When it comes to dealing with other people, that attitude is understandable. But what do we expect from God? The answer depends, in part, on your own spiritual condition.

As sinners, we should expect judgment and condemnation for our sins. We complain about adversity and feel sorry for ourselves when we face problems. We try to pretend that others are worse sinners than we are. But when we compare ourselves to God's standards, we see what we really are: sinners. We don't deserve any blessings. We don't deserve any favor from God.

And yet...we find the Heavenly Father's greatest blessings and favor. Not because of who *we* are or what *we* have done, but because of who *he* is. When we know him, we find something far greater than we could ever expect.

V.

Elizabeth had resigned herself to her presumed fate: she would not have a child. The God of grace and blessings caused her to conceive. Despite her age and the age of Zechariah, she became pregnant. Her baby was John the Baptist.

Her own body testified to the fact that God could work miracles. She was proof that God could exceed human expectations.

God did not stop there. When Mary came to her, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth was one of the first to recognize and greet the incarnate Son of God—and so was John, even while he was still in his mother's womb.

Like Elizabeth we should *expect* to receive nothing. But God's gracious gifts exceed our human expectations. Instead of God's wrath we find his grace. Instead of God rejecting us, we find love and acceptance. Instead of punishment, we receive Jesus who became our Savior. He took our sin and suffering and death and faced them all in our place. He gave us back his life and holiness.

He still keeps giving freely and graciously. We find his grace renewed each day. We know his presence is with us. We experience his guiding hand. His gracious gifts exceed all our expectations.

What are you expecting this Christmas? You may find disappointments in this life in the actions of others and even yourself. But when it comes to our Lord, we find something completely different. He is faithful. He gives the greatest gifts, because his gracious gifts exceed all human expectation. Amen.