

**TUTORIAL**  
**1.35**

# God foretold the birth of John and fulfilled His promises

See Tutorial 1.6 notes for overall instructions.

The portions of Scripture referred to in this tutorial are: **Luke 1:5-25, 67-79.**

## Last time

We noted how God's commitment to Israel, to communicating with them, and through them to the other nations, did not waiver despite their repeated unfaithfulness. Eventually, after many warnings through His prophets, God judged the two kingdoms through military defeat and exile. After a generation, many Hebrews returned to Palestine. Their territory was occupied by others a number of times over the following centuries, culminating with the Romans around 60 BC.

## A prophet is to come to prepare Israel for the Deliverer

Around 340 years before the Romans, God equips and sends one of His storytellers, His prophets, to the Jews. His name is Malachi, the last prophet recorded in the first of the two major divisions of God's Word, the Old Testament. Malachi reminds the Jewish people of God's promise – first given in the dark time of the Fall – that He would send a Deliverer. He says that this long-promised one will come soon. But just before he does, another prophet will come bringing a message from God designed to prepare them for the arrival of the Deliverer.

After Malachi's death, God does not send another prophet for 400 years. It is as though God is silent, waiting to send the promised one. In fact, those 400 years are traditionally called the "silent years" for that reason. However, as we look back on this period of history, we are able to see how God is using events and individuals to prepare for what is coming.

Through the process of Hellenisation, the Greek language has become widely used throughout the entire region. Many people groups formerly isolated are now able to communicate with each other. Later, to further Rome's military ambitions and then serve the needs of the Empire, a vast network of roads is

built. Cities throughout the provinces are linked in ways that has never happened before. During this time, Hebrew people spread and settle throughout much of the Mediterranean basin, bringing monotheism and a knowledge of God's Word with them. Synagogues are built in far-flung communities and for the first time, God's Narrative with its promises about the Deliverer becomes widely accessible.

## **John “the Baptist” prepares the way for the Deliverer**

We pick up the Narrative at a time when Palestine has been under Roman dominance for some decades. Among the Jews eagerly waiting for the arrival of the Messiah - God's specially chosen one - is an elderly, childless couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. (Luke 1:5-25)

One day, while Zechariah, a priest, is carrying out his duties in the Temple, one of God's spirit messengers – an angel – appears in physical form. Zechariah is told that, although aged, he and Elizabeth are to have a son. They are to call him John – in Hebrew or Aramaic form, “God has shown grace”. As the angel goes on to describe John's role, it's clear that he is the prophet Malachi predicted would come immediately before the Deliverer. His message would be designed to prepare people's hearts for the Promised One. But most startling and exciting of all, was the news that the Deliverer would be the Lord Himself. Somehow God would be coming among His people in a special way. What could this mean?

So John is born to this couple in their old age. As we've noted before, God is not restricted by the laws of nature which are, of course, His design anyway. A few days after the birth, God the Spirit gives Zechariah the special ability to speak for God – to prophecy. (Luke 1:67-79) He declares that the promises passed on by God's prophets down through history about the Messiah are about to come true. And God is going to come good on the promise He made to Abraham...the promise that through him, through his family line, all the families of the earth would be blessed.

John, when he grows up, is to prepare the way by telling the people about their sins and how they can be saved from them. The one whose way John is to prepare will be the Lord Himself. Zechariah says that because of God's mercy the morning light of heaven is about to break upon them. And light will come to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. Since Adam and Eve willingly listened to the lies of Satan, in many ways darkness had ruled the earth and its human inhabitants.

Of course God's creation continued to speak day after day, to tell His Story. And He had revealed Himself to human beings numerous times. He had made a covenant, given His Law and lived among his people, the Israelites. He'd sent His prophets, and their words had been recorded. But Satan had seen to it that

people continued to be confused. And the people themselves, the Narrative says, on the whole prefer darkness because they feel it allows them to do what they want without accountability.

So God is now going to come into the darkness Himself. And by doing so, He's going to bring light, truth. To expose things for what they really are. To reveal the lies. And above all, to demonstrate who He really is in a way that has never happened before. He's going to come and find those who'll listen. Those who through John's work, through His written Word, through His Spirit, are ready to listen. And He's going to tell His Story directly to them, in an unprecedented way. This event, God coming into the world in this way, is going to be the most momentous event in all history. It will prove to be the thing which ties together and makes sense of everything in God's Narrative...the past, the present and the future.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

*God foretold the birth of John and fulfilled His promises*

1. The lesson makes the point that during the 400 years between the Old and New Testament narratives, God was preparing the way for the Deliverer. Do some research as necessary and describe the context in the Mediterranean area by the end of that period. Include some thoughts on the geo-political situation, the cultural and linguistic changes, and the technological advances that would later allow the Message about the Messiah to spread rapidly.
2. Picture yourself as a believing Israelite in the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth that day when he was prophesying about the coming Deliverer. How do you think you'd feel to hear that the long-awaited Messiah was about to come? Describe in your own words the emotions, the excitement, you'd feel. What do you think might be some wrong assumptions you could make about what His role would be and how He was going to deliver His people?