

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Women of Faith: Elisabeth

*Elisabeth, a precious name,
Where God's promise is found.
A child of Aaron's priestly line
To Zacharias bound.
Righteous before a holy God,
She followed His commands.
Blameless before her Jewish peers
She met her Lord's demands.*

*But, sadly, she had borne no child.
Conception was deferred.
The prayers of many, many years
Seemed not to have been heard.
Though disappointed in this way,
Each day, she persevered.
Then her husband was struck dumb.
This was to her quite weird.*

*In written form, the news he told -
A son was to be born.
Many to the Lord, he'd turn
And others he would warn.
From the womb a Nazarite,
God's way he would prepare.
For Christ Himself was then to come
A King beyond compare.*

*'Twas soon Elisabeth conceived;
Reproach was turned aside.
And as her pregnancy progressed
For Mary she'd provide.
This virgin had herself conceived.
A son was in her womb.
And with her cousin, she would stay.
For she would give her room.*

*Upon the greeting Mary made
(When she first came to stay).
With joy, the babe leapt in her womb
The Spirit taking sway.
"How blessed you are - women among,"
The older woman cried.
"How blessed the fruit within your womb,"
She then proclaimed beside.*

*She wondered why it was allowed
That Mary came to dwell.
The mother of her Lord had come;
The reason none could tell.
'Twas then that Mary sang a song
Blessing her Saviour, dear.
Ascribing greatness to His name
And that with godly fear.*

*A dozen weeks was Mary's stay
Before returning home.
Then a child to 'Beth was born
For her full time had come.
And on the eighth day as was wont
The boy was circumcised.
Surprisingly, they called him, "John",
A son most greatly prized.*

(GE Stevens)

In this talk about Elisabeth, we will examine her name, family ties, righteous life, barren state, age, gratitude, song and joy.

In Luke 1:5-6 we read: *"There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless."*

The meaning of the name "Elisabeth"

We start by considering the meaning of the name "Elisabeth". It means "The Oath of God". From what follows, we shall see that she was a devout woman. Like Anna (see Luke 2:36-38), she was one of the faithful remnant of Israel living in an evil day.

We find the actual "oath of God" mentioned in the song of Zacharias in Luke 1:73. The oath to which he refers is found in Genesis 22:16-17 where the angel of the LORD spoke to Abraham and said, *"By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice."*

The seed of Abraham was literally the Hebrew nation; but also refers specifically to the Christ who will one day reign as the King of kings and Lord of lords (see 1 Timothy 6:15). So the name of Elisabeth must have reminded her of this promise which envelops so many others that relate to Christ in the Old Testament scriptures.

The family ties of Elisabeth

Next, we take a look at the family ties of Elisabeth. She was married to Zacharias (Luke 1:5). He was a priest of the course of Abijah (Luke 1:5). His name means "Yah remembers". He served in the temple on a shift basis and would have stayed for that period of time in the temple precincts. Unlike many of the priests of the day, he was truly devoted to God. Zacharias and Elisabeth were well matched because she was a daughter of the priestly family of Aaron. It was commendable in that day for a priest to marry a wife who was also a descendent of Aaron (Luke 1:5).

Today, we are reminded that we, as Christians, should not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14). Therefore, a Christian should marry a Christian. This is because the Christian has a new nature that desires to honour God and the unbeliever has a nature that blocks out God. Just as an unequal yoke of different animals would not work well together, so an unequal yoke in marriage would be unlikely to work very well because the couple would be pulling at different rates and probably in different directions as well. Of course, the unequal yoke is not limited to marriage; it applies to most things that are contractually binding between two people, for example, being partners in business.

The righteousness of Elisabeth

Now we turn to the righteousness of Elisabeth. Elisabeth and her husband walked in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord (Luke 1:6). They had a fervent love for God. The keeping of the *commandments* revealed their moral worth to all; the *ordinances* refer to the ceremonial aspects of their lives towards God. These they dutifully kept.

If we apply these things to Christians today, then we would say that believers should be personally obedient to God's will but also faithful in responsibilities in their local church. So where would I find the commandments of the Lord? Well, some are directly recorded as the words of the Lord in the four gospels, and the epistles also contain them.

In relation to the gospels, we remember that the Lord Himself said in John 14:21: *"He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him."* It is a beautiful thought that the measure of our obedience is, at the same time, a measure of our love for the Lord Jesus Himself.

When we come to the epistles, we there find the writings of Paul and others. Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 14:37 that the things he writes are the commandments of the Lord. He states: *"If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord."* In a day when Paul is accused of being prejudiced in his writing, we must stand by him because his God-inspired writings (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17) include the commandments of the Lord Himself.

We then approach the subject of church responsibilities. Some, even real Christians, might say, "I don't have to go to church to be a Christian!" However, such people would be disobeying the word of God because Christians are told not to forsake the gathering of themselves together (Hebrews 10:25). They are also encouraged to continue steadfastly in the apostle's doctrine and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers (Acts 2:42). So they ought to be attending meetings of the church for teaching, the remembrance of the Lord Jesus and prayer. In fact, the Lord Jesus promises His special presence to those who gather together to pray. In Matthew 18:20 we read His words: *"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."* Furthermore, it was His personal request that we remember Him in the breaking of bread (which you may know as "Holy Communion" or the "Lord's Supper").

Note also that Elisabeth and Zacharias did these things "in the sight of God." They were motivated to please and obey God. They wanted to be accepted by Him alone. They did not seek to have the praise of men (see Galatians 1:10). Nevertheless, their righteousness must have shone out from their lives as a witness of godly living. Furthermore, they did not seek to live in luxury (as other priests did); but preferred to live in a village in a hilly region of Juda (Luke 1:39).

Today, Christian couples who are thinking of marriage should embrace these two things. First, to have the desire to live a godly life together and, second, to avoid being caught up in the covetous desires of the world.

The barren state of Elisabeth

The barren state of Elisabeth is the next subject for consideration. While the life of Elisabeth was blameless, she still suffered reproach from others in the Jewish culture because she was barren. Some might argue that barrenness was grounds for divorce. They might use Deuteronomy 24:1 to support this argument. This is not my personal belief, because although divorce was allowed for some things under Old Testament law, Christian couples of the New Testament era are to be committed to a life-long relationship in marriage.

How Zacharias and Elisabeth must have prayed for children throughout their married lives; but none had been forthcoming. This may have destroyed the faith of a lesser woman. Yet, even though suffering embarrassment and scorn, Elisabeth remained faithful to her God. How commendable!

Dear Christian, it may be that you have some kind of problem that causes other people to scorn or despise you; it may be a weakness or disability. Do you blame God for it? Do you want victory over it? Know this - God loves you and always seeks the very best for you. If he's given you some kind of handicap or illness do what a Christian woman I knew did when she was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer. She knelt before God and, between her sobs, thanked the Lord for it. What a victory she scored in the realms of heaven? By doing this, she glorified God. Read Job 1 and see if you can work out what I mean. Of course, many went on to pray for her and her healing; but there came a point (four years later) when she herself stopped clinging to this life and its relationships and simply committed herself to the Lord's will by refusing further treatment. She soon passed on to be with her Lord and Saviour which the Bible describes as far, far better (see Philippians 1:23).

Well, in the case of Zacharias and Elisabeth, the opposite was to happen. When we put the two meanings of their names together, we get "Yah remembers His promise or oath." What was this promise? In this particular case, we find part of it in Malachi 3:1: "Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts." This messenger (who was to announce the coming of the Messiah) was none other than the son of Zacharias and Elisabeth, namely, John the Baptist.

The trial of these two faithful servants of God was soon over and resulted in a wonderful blessing for Israel. Have you ever thought that the trial you are currently passing through will be for someone else's ultimate blessing? The thoughts of God are, indeed, higher than our thoughts and His ways are far above our ways. It may not *seem* to be the case for us, but His ways *are* perfect!

In the Jewish culture, the woman's inability to provide children was considered a failure on her part. Today, however, we know that physically speaking, it may be a weakness in the woman or the man. Whichever may be the case, it is very painful for the couple who desperately want children to find that they can't have them. It may be that you know such a couple. If so, pray that they may know the will of God for their lives. It may be that the Lord doesn't want them to have children at this time. Yet, they may have them later in life. Or, it may be that the Lord wants them to adopt a needy child. I know of a couple who were unsuccessful in conceiving children, so adopted a young boy. Not long afterwards, they also had a child of their own. Both grew up being equally loved and cared for. The Lord does indeed work in mysterious ways!

It is worthy to note that Zacharias as an individual husband never gave up hope. When Gabriel appeared to him, the angel said: "*Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John*" (Luke 1:13). Zacharias had been praying about this problem with Elisabeth, but also as an individual.

Elisabeth's age

Then we come to Elisabeth's age. As Elisabeth was now well stricken in years (Luke 1:7) she would have thought that child-bearing was impossible. She must have been absolutely amazed to discover from her husband that it was prophesied by an angel of the Lord (Gabriel - mighty one of God) that their prayer had been heard and that she would bear a son. But not just any son - a son who would turn many of Israel back to the Lord their God and to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. With God, all things are possible! (see Luke 1:37, Matthew 19:26, Mark 10:27).

It is interesting that Zacharias, by the power of the Spirit, stated concerning John: "*And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; to give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins*" (Luke 1:76-77). What a commission the son of Zacharias would undertake in the will of the Lord. He was to be a faithful prophet of God, speaking the mind of God to a failing people. He was to be the forerunner of the Messiah. It was John who later pointed his disciples to the true Messiah (see John 1:35-37). It was John who said of Jesus, "*He must increase. I must decrease*" (John 3:30). He also preached repentance for the remission of sins and the fact that the kingdom of God was near at hand (See Matthew 3:2).

It is worthy of note that the old age of Elisabeth and that of Anna did not stop them from serving the Lord. They continued as far as physically and mentally possible. With so much emphasis put upon reaching and teaching the young these days, let's remember that the older believers still need teaching and support as well. And, if we ourselves are counted among the aged, let us always remember to study the word and pray on a daily basis. Let's have the ambition of the aged writer of Psalm 71:18: "*Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God, forsake me not; until I have shewed thy strength unto this generation, and thy power to every one that is to come.*" His desire was to pass on his knowledge of God before he left this world.

The gratitude of Elisabeth

Let's take a look at the gratitude of Elisabeth. She must have rejoiced that she would give birth to the one who would prepare the way of the Lord. At the same time, she was grateful that the Lord would take away the reproach she had suffered and make her a blessing instead. The timing of God is always perfect. We need to have close communion with Him through prayer and the study of God's word if we are to serve Him faithfully and discern the right time to do specific work. It may be worthwhile to mention that thanksgiving is an important part of our prayer life. To give thanks is the acknowledging of a gift, act or promise that someone has given or done - and, who has done more than God! Praise of God, on the other hand, not only acknowledges that these things are from Him, but also gives Him the glory for them.

The "song" of Elisabeth

The "song" of Elisabeth is found in Luke 1:42-45. When visited by Mary (Luke 1:39-56), she knew that her cousin spoke the truth, because the baby to be called John leapt in her womb when Elisabeth heard Mary's voice (Luke 1:41). In fact, the baby leapt for joy showing that it had emotions after only six months of development. This must have a bearing on unnecessary abortions today. Elisabeth was then filled with the Holy Ghost and said with a loud voice, "*Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord*" (Luke 1:42-45).

Elisabeth realised that Mary had been chosen to bear the Messiah, who was, in fact, the eternal Son of God. She could call the baby in Mary's womb her Lord. She probably knew the scripture in Psalm 110:1 where we read: *"A Psalm of David. The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool."* The Psalm speaks of Christ after the order of Melchizedek - both King and Priest (see Hebrews 7:1).

She also rejoiced that Mary had been chosen to be the Virgin who would give birth to the child who would be called Emmanuel - "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). This goes right back to the promise of God found in Genesis 3:15: *"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."* In Daniel 11:27 this desire to give birth to the Messiah is called "the desire of women". Yet, Elisabeth showed no signs of jealousy in regard to Mary and her great blessing. In fact, it was the opposite - she was only too happy to help her at a difficult time. At the same time, her attitude confirmed the reality of the Lord's purpose in both herself and her cousin. What a remarkable woman she was!

The joy of Elisabeth

The joy of Elisabeth may be inferred from Luke 1:59-66. If the birth of her baby brought Elisabeth joy, then the circumcision and naming of the child led to even more rejoicing. We read: *"And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father. And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John. And they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name. And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called. And he asked for a writing table, and wrote, saying, His name is John. And they marvelled all. And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God. And fear came on all that dwelt round about them: and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judaea. And all they that heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be! And the hand of the Lord was with him"* (Luke 1:59-66).

Elisabeth was true to the Lord. She insisted that the child be called "John" (Luke 1:60), despite the adverse pressure from those around her (Luke 1:61). This pressure was turned to joy when her husband confirmed the name by listing it on a writing tablet and immediately regained his speech (Luke 1:62-46). And, what was the first thing he did? Why he praised the Lord and prophesied! He did so with a song known today as the "Benedictus" which gives a fitting end to this talk on Elisabeth because it speaks so well of both John and Jesus. *"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; as he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began: that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; the oath which he swore to our father Abraham, That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life. And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; to give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace"* (Luke 1:68-79).

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