

Elizabeth: Mother of John the Baptist

by Stephanie Catmull



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Elizabeth

Wife of Zechariah and Mother of John the Baptist

Luke 1: 5-25; 39-80

Elizabeth, widely known for her role as mother of John the Baptist and relative of the Virgin Mary, is one of the most prominent, highly regarded women in the Bible. Although these two roles speak volumes as to her historical biblical and historical significance, they speak little as to what Elizabeth endured and experienced to become such a woman. Her godly character can be discerned equally from what the Bible doesn't say about her, as much as from what it does say. Indelibly, Elizabeth becomes not only a crucial figure, but also one that is highly admired and respected, becoming an inspiration to all women from Biblical to modern times.

Elizabeth, descended from the priestly lineage of Aaron, was raised in the worship, prayers, customs, reverence, and teachings under Jewish law. She was fully exposed to the feasts, offerings, sacrifices, and daily demands of Jewish life. In essence, Elizabeth was raised Jewish through and through. Her stellar reputation as an upright Hebrew woman would have also made her highly sought after as a priest's wife, ultimately wedding her social and spiritual equal in Zechariah (also a priestly descendant from the lineage of Aaron). She and her husband resided near the Great Temple of Jerusalem, and as such were frequent visitors. She was a direct witness to the desecration of King Herod's improvements to the Temple, and saw firsthand the priestly corruption overriding the Jewish people's sacrificial offerings to God. She watched belatedly as her beloved Judaism was becoming more of a religion of man rather than of God. She had a choice to make at this crossroads in her life: fall prey to the seduction of power and riches that this corruption afforded, or remain steadfast to her God and her faith. True to her character, her love, obedience, and faith in Yahweh was her ultimate desire. Her lineage and reputation intact, coupled with her marriage to Zechariah, allowed her to eventually become the recipient of one of God's greatest blessings and mercy.

Yet, Elizabeth was also living in an age where there had not been a definitive prophecy from God for over 400 years. As she remained wholeheartedly devoted to God, ever hopeful for the coming Savior that was predicted in the Scriptures, she did not lower herself to pagan worship, even though the “coming” appeared all but faded. She did not doubt the truth of God’s Word, but lived it as much as she believed it. She and her husband are described in the Bible as being “blameless”. Keep in mind that this does not mean that Elizabeth did not sin, but that she took the appropriate measures if and when she did sin. As with Abraham, her faith was attributed to her as righteousness, and she was looked upon with God’s favor, as she was given the gift of “one who would call out in the desert”.

Before this happened, however, there was this little thing called barrenness that formed a dark cloud over Elizabeth’s otherwise blessed life. In Jewish society, it was necessary for Elizabeth to give birth to a son in case of her husband’s death, so that her son would provide for her and prevent her from becoming destitute in her old age. Children were also considered a sign of God’s blessings and favor. Having no children were a sign of God’s disfavor, leading to social scorn and ridicule. When we meet Elizabeth in the Bible, she is advanced in years, meaning that she was at least 60 years of age and well past child bearing years. Much like both Sarah and Hannah of the Old Testament, she would have been severely subjected to the denigrations and gossip of other Jewish women. Elizabeth was invariably a loving, supportive wife to her husband, since Zechariah chose not to divorce her as was his choice since she did not conceive. People whispered about her, ridiculed her, mistrusted her, and wondered what her secret sin was. She endured it all with much courage, humility, prayer, and love. She trusted in God for this small thing, as she had faith in God for the coming Savior. Like both Hannah and Sarah, she was rewarded for her longstanding faithfulness.

At a crucial point in their lives, Zechariah, her priestly husband, was chosen by “lot” to burn incense inside the Temple (a Judean custom that took place every six months). Essentially, the 24 divisions of priests -1,000 in each division - would draw straws, with each division getting a turn as their order came up in line. Because of the 24,000 priests, the odds were heavily against being chosen, especially since each division would only get a chance once every 12 years. This year, Zechariah’s lot was chosen, proving that he was honored by God by being elected for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. This was not an accident that Zechariah was chosen at this moment in time, at this place in the world, to be given such favor. Unbeknownst to him or his wife, this chosen “lot” would signify great things to come. It took 60 years for this couple to prepare for their moment to shine in God’s glory. God was getting ready to shake the world, and He was going to use Zechariah’s wife to do it.

How do you think that Elizabeth responded when she found out that her husband, and by extension her, was chosen for such an important task? She could have been a religious snob, thinking that she was entitled to this since she had

devoted her life to God. She could have lorded it over all her friends and relatives who had sneered at her over the years and made her life miserable. She could have dressed herself in the finest linens of an honored priest's wife, as many others before her had done. She could have persuaded her husband to dip into the Temple's treasury. But she does none of these things. In keeping with her character, she supports her husband by preparing her home for the priests' prayer meetings, and humbly submits to the will of God. Her life, through this honor, does not change, and her commitment sets up the greatest blessing that is about to be bestowed upon her. Probably, Elizabeth is among the throngs of worshippers outside the temple, praying as the pleasing smoke of fragrant incense lifts their prayers to Almighty God as her husband lights the candles from within.

As relayed in the Book of Luke, Zechariah is visited by the angel Gabriel as he performs the ceremony inside the Holy Place of the Temple. Gabriel, in great detail, tells him of the son he and Elizabeth are going to have, and all the blessings that will come forth upon their nation because of it. Zechariah asks for a sign, and as a punishment for his unbelief is struck mute. His speech temporarily gone, his only means of communicating are through sign language and writing on wax tablets. He forlornly exits the temple, stays for the rest of the week while his time of service is completed, and travels home dazed and confused. Elizabeth, knowing that he has seen a vision, does not doubt what Zechariah "tells" her. As unbelievable as the story sounds, Elizabeth has the unwavering faith that the message comes from God. She doesn't question its truth or validity, and is a better person than her husband for it. She humbly accepts it with gratefulness and joy. We can't be sure of all Zechariah told her, or if he relayed all the angel had said. But she knew her son's name would be John, because she pronounces his name at the brie BEFORE Zechariah is able to speak again.

Interestingly, Elizabeth remains in seclusion for the first five months of her pregnancy. This was not a common practice, as even her cousin Mary would come to visit her during her first trimester. Maybe it was because she was physically having a difficult time. Maybe it was because she didn't want anyone to know until she was past her second trimester, in case of a miscarriage. Maybe she was extremely frightened that any of King Herod's henchmen would see her growing belly, and subject her child to the ordered infanticide that was the law of the land. In any event, Elizabeth does not shout her pregnancy from the rooftops, telling no one about the child growing inside her. She quietly accepts her favor from God, and radiates privately in her blessing as the veil of disgrace is lifted from her life.

Already given the gift of Faith (one of the Gifts of the Spirit), Elizabeth now is given the gift of Intercessory Prayer as she continually prays for her husband as he is in the throngs of punishment. They cannot speak with each other, and because of his sin, greatly affects their marriage. Her previous disgrace of barrenness now has transformed into his disgrace of muteness. Yet all the while

Elizabeth supports her husband as he did during her years of sterility. Their bond to each other becomes stronger instead of being torn apart, as they have each forgiven the other for their transgressions, and love each other through it. She does not become the constant dripping of a wife, reminding him daily of his doubt and sin. She loves him, forgives him, and carries him on her shoulders as she carries his child in her womb.

Through her seclusion, though, Elizabeth becomes inevitably lonely with no one to talk to. She is visited by the Virgin Mary (some scholars deem Mary as either her relative or cousin), who is already three months pregnant with Jesus. Elizabeth takes a great chance in opening her doors to this woman, as Mary is presumably the talk of the town with her “illegitimate” child. Elizabeth, in all her social stature, ran a great risk in being hospitable towards her, relative or not. She also ran a great risk to her husband’s profession, as he could be chastised by his priestly colleagues for entertaining a woman of such reputation. It is with great love and courage that she invites Mary in. Elizabeth, of all people, has had great practice in ignoring the condescending whispers and attitudes of others.

As she welcomes Mary with open arms, Elizabeth is immediately overcome with the Holy Spirit as her baby John leaps inside her. This is no ordinary fluttering kick from a baby, and as the Holy Spirit enters Elizabeth, she prophesies that Mary is the mother of our Lord. She recognizes that she is being further blessed by God in Mary’s visit, and praises Mary’s pregnancy instead of remonstrating her for it. Elizabeth is not jealous of Mary. She is not jealous that Mary’s son will be greater than hers. Nor does she doubt the truth of Jesus’ conception. As always, Elizabeth exhibits true godly character. She took care of Mary, nurtured her through her difficult time, and gave her the strength to return to her family and to the people who mistrusted her. Through Elizabeth’s life of shame and disgrace, she knew what Mary was going through (save for the Immaculate Conception), and knew how she had become a social pariah. God knew what He was doing by allowing Elizabeth to travel that long suffering path, because she was able to impart her wisdom and discernment to the Mother of God at the time that Mary would need it. And He brings these two saintly women together so that they could encourage, praise, love, and be there for each other when their husbands and the rest of society couldn’t.

Quite assuredly, these two women had much to talk about. Was the foreshadowing of the Scriptures’ prophecies beginning to take place? And imagine that both of their families had recently been visited by the angel Gabriel! Did they compare pregnancy notes – one from a teenager and one from a senior citizen? Did they share their fears of King Herod’s law of infanticide, discussing the multitudes of families destroyed by this horrific edict? Did they speak about the future of their two sons? Did they have an inkling as to what lay ahead for them and their nation? Were they in awe of each other, knowing that each was favored by God? Did they have any idea the magnitude that their sons would have on the eternal world? Together for three months, these

conversations would have been endless.

Mary eventually leaves (the Bible does not state whether it is before or after the birth of John the Baptist), and Elizabeth gives birth to her son. In accordance with Jewish custom, her son was to be circumcised and named on the eighth day. The Bible does not say if they brought him to the Temple for this ritual, as would have befit their priestly heritage. However, remember that King Herod's soldiers were on the rampage looking for any boy under two years of age to murder, and the Temple would have been an obvious place for a stakeout. More than likely, they chose to perform the ceremony at another priest's house, with Elizabeth more than a little afraid to take her son out in public. But her devotion and obedience to God was stronger than her fear of Herod. Regardless of where the Brit Milah (circumcision ceremony) took place, the entire priestly audience and the relatives expected the boy to be named after Zechariah, since the father was of such advanced years. But Elizabeth speaks up, a socially glaring gaff at such a male dominated tradition, by proclaiming his name to be John. She could have melted in fear when all eyes bore into her, and bowed under peer pressure to change the name. But Elizabeth is much stronger than that, as her whole life has prepared her. The audience doesn't take her word for it, though she speaks with authority, and they instead turn to her husband. Affirming the name, Zechariah is finally able to speak aloud, and joins in her belief and faith in God, and in the words spoken by the angel Gabriel.

This is the last time that Elizabeth is mentioned in the Bible, and here her earthly story ends. Some scholars believe that Zechariah was killed when he wouldn't turn over the location of his son during the Roman infanticide, resulting in Elizabeth fleeing with John into the deserts of Judea and remaining under the protection of the Essenes. Some believe that Elizabeth died quietly of old age, leaving John's upbringing to this famous Qumran community. Her legend continues eternal, and her life between the lines of the Bible speaks volumes as to her character.

Both Zechariah and Mary sing praises to God, through Elizabeth's inspiration. Elizabeth exhibits numerous treasured gifts of the Spirit, namely Faith, Prophecy, and Discernment. She gives birth to the forerunner of Jesus' ministry, one who becomes famously known as John the Baptist. She was wholly dedicated to God, and every single moment of her life is proof of this. Revered as one of the most prominent women of the Bible, she is a testament to living a Godly life, and a beautiful example of the Proverbs 31 woman that is an inspiration to all women, Jew and Gentile alike.