

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
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**THE ANCESTRY DNA OF JESUS:  
JOHN THE BAPTIST**

**Luke 1:5-25**

Genealogical research is a big thing these days. People have always been interested in discovering their family tree. With the advent of DNA testing done by companies like Ancestry DNA and 23andMe, it is easier than ever to gain information, or at least clues, about your genetic make-up. Mary Sue and I have both had our DNA tested to learn more about our ancestry. I'm sure some of you have, too. The upside of DNA testing is that you can learn a lot about where you came from and get answers to questions you may have about your roots. The potential downside is that you may be in for some surprises for which you are not prepared. Your family's "story" may turn out to be different than you always believed.

Between now and Christmas, I want you to look with me at "the Ancestry DNA of Jesus." You may or may not be surprised by some of what the Bible tells us about the family tree of Jesus. I promise you, though, that nothing we discover about the ancestry of Jesus will change the fact of His identity as the true Son of God and the only Savior of sinners. He is truly God in flesh and blood who came to live among us and gave His life for us to save us from our sins and reconcile us to God the Father.

We begin our investigation into the Ancestry DNA of Jesus by starting where the Gospel of Luke does, with the story of the birth of Jesus' cousin John – commonly known as John the Baptist. The story of John's family origins is found only in the Gospel of Luke. I invite you to follow along in your Bible as I read from Luke 1:5-25. May we give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's Holy Word.

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Several weeks ago, when looking at Paul's top ten reasons to praise God in Ephesians 1, we took a little side trip to identify the ten shortest verses in the Bible. Fear not, we're not going to revisit that today. On a different but related note, though, Luke 1 is the answer to the question: What is the longest chapter in the New Testament? It may or may not be the longest chapter in terms of the actual number of words, but in terms of the number of verses, Luke 1, with 80 verses, is the longest in the New Testament. Not in the whole Bible, of course, since Psalm 119 has a whopping 176 verses. But the prequel to the birth of Jesus contained in Luke 1 is the longest chapter, by number of verses, in the entire New Testament.

There is a lot that Luke tells us here. In leading up to his account of the birth of Jesus in Luke 2, he tells us, in chapter 1, of:

- The announcement to Zechariah of John's coming birth (1:5-25);
- The announcement to Mary of Jesus' coming birth (1:26-38);
- The visit of Mary to Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah (1:39-45);

- Mary’s song of praise to God (1:46-56);
- The birth, circumcision, and naming of John, (1:57-66); and
- Zechariah’s song of praise to God after the birth of John (1:67-80).

In this chapter, we have two appearances of the angel Gabriel, one to Zechariah in the temple (1:11-20) and one to Mary in Nazareth (1:26-38), with two announcements of miraculous pregnancies and births to come. The miracle of the pregnancy of Zechariah’s wife Elizabeth is not the same as the miracle of Mary’s pregnancy. Unlike Mary, who is a virgin, Elizabeth is not. But, while their circumstances are different, their pregnancies are both miraculous.

In addition, we have two different responses to the respective messages from Gabriel to Zechariah and Mary. The words spoken by Zechariah (1:18) and Mary (1:34) are very similar. But their tone was different. It was evident to Gabriel that Zechariah responded with doubt and disbelief, while Mary spoke from a heart of trusting faith. Though he should have known better, Zechariah doubted the angel and seems to have wanted Gabriel to give him a sign that what the angel said would really come true. To which Gabriel said, in effect: “Can’t you see, Zechariah? *I am* the sign. What other sign do you need? Isn’t it enough that I have appeared to you to give you this promise from God? But, OK, I’ll give you another sign: You will not be able to speak from this moment until the promise comes true in God’s time. Which it will” (1:19-20). And it did – about nine months later.

Luke also records two “songs” in chapter 1. There is the song of Mary known as the *Magnificat* (the name taken from the first word of the Latin translation of Mary’s song) in verses 46-55, and the song of Zechariah in verses 67-79, known as the *Benedictus* (the name also taken from the first word of the Latin translation of it). Zechariah’s song contains the first recorded words to come out of his mouth after being unable to speak, ever since his encounter with Gabriel in the temple nine months earlier.

Focusing this morning on John the Baptist and his family line, let’s look at what Luke tells us. We may begin by asking the question: Why does Luke begin his account of the life and ministry of Jesus by describing in detail the origins of John the Baptist?

The answer is that John was to play a key, critical role in the working out of God’s plan to send the long-awaited Messiah, His Son, to rescue and redeem us from our bondage to sin. John was not the Messiah. He knew he was not the promised Savior. But he would be the forerunner of the Messiah. He would be, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, “the voice of one calling in the desert: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’” (Isaiah 40:3). He would be the bridge between the time of the Old and New Testaments. After a four centuries’ long period of silence in which God did not speak to His covenant people through the voice of a prophet, John would be the final prophet of the Old Testament period – before the initiation of Jesus’ public ministry – and also, as the forerunner of the Messiah, the first herald or witness of the arrival of the kingdom of God.

Even while still in the womb of his mother Elizabeth, John would be filled with the Holy Spirit (1:15) and set apart for the Lord’s service. As Gabriel told Zechariah, his son’s ministry would have profound impacts: He would bring back many sons and daughters of

Israel to the Lord their God. He would go before the Lord and “herald the Lord’s arrival in the style and strength of Elijah” (MSG). He would “turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” [NIV] (1:16-17).

Jesus Himself would say that John was “a prophet ... and more than a prophet.” Quoting Malachi 3:1, Jesus said: “He [John] is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way for you.’” Jesus went on to say that “among those born of women there is no one greater than John” (Matthew 11:9-11; Luke 7:26-28). Then, in pointing to John as the line of demarcation between the Old and the New, Jesus said: “All the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come” (Matthew 11:13-14).

*The Elijah who was to come.* The Jewish people lived with the expectation that Elijah, considered to be the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets, would return before the coming of the promised Messiah. Elijah would come to prepare the way for Him. Know where this idea comes from? It comes from the final verses of the final chapter of the final book of the Old Testament. In the Book of the prophet Malachi, written about 400 years before the birth of Jesus, Malachi concludes, in chapter 4, verses 5 and 6, with a promise of the coming of the prophet Elijah, who will proclaim God’s offer of forgiveness to all who repent of their sins and turn to God in trusting faith, and “turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers” (Malachi 4:5-6); or else judgment will come on those who refuse to repent and turn to God.

John the Baptist was chosen by God to take up the mantle and ministry of Elijah and prepare the way, in God’s time and according to God’s plan, for God’s chosen and anointed Deliverer, God’s very own Son, to take on our flesh and blood and carry out God’s plan for our salvation.

I talked a few minutes ago about the 400-year-long period of silence in which God did not speak to His people through the voice of a prophet, from the time of Malachi until the time of John. From the time of the Book of Malachi around 430 BC until Gabriel’s appearance to Zechariah in the temple around 5 or 4 BC, near the end of the rule of Herod the Great in Judea, God had not spoken.

*400 years is a long time.* Longer than our nation has been in existence. Do you remember Apollo 13, NASA’s mission to the moon in April 1970 with astronauts Jim Lovell, Jack Swigert, and Fred Haise? Ron Howard made a fabulous movie about it in 1995, starring Tom Hanks (as Lovell), Kevin Bacon (Swigert), Bill Paxton (Haise), Gary Sinise (astronaut Ken Mattingly), and Ed Harris (flight director Gene Kranz). The planned lunar landing had to be aborted after an oxygen tank exploded. There was grave concern that the Apollo 13 spacecraft and its crew might not be able to make it home but might end up being lost in space. Upon the command module’s re-entry into the earth’s atmosphere, there was a blackout period during which there would be no visual or audio communication with the astronauts. This blackout period was expected to be about four minutes. It lasted longer than four minutes. Longer than five minutes. With every passing second, the level of tension and

anxiety increased. There was fear that possibility of damage to the heat shield from the oxygen tank rupture would prevent a safe return to the earth's atmosphere. Finally, after six minutes of gut-wrenching, heart-palpating silence, the voices of the astronauts were heard once more, and the command module splashed down safely in the South Pacific.

Those six minutes of silence – close to *400 seconds* – must have seemed like forever to NASA and the families of the astronauts. Ron Howard portrays it dramatically in the movie. The people of Israel went *400 years* without hearing from God. What they did not know was that, while God was silent, He was not asleep. While God was silent, He was not doing nothing. He was still at work, getting everything in readiness for the coming of the promised Messiah “in the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4). And you can be sure that God is still at work today. He is still sovereign today. He is still working out His grace-filled, loving plans for your life, for my life, for His church, and for the world. He has not changed. He will not change. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

Do not doubt the promise of God, as Zechariah did. Do not doubt the word of God. What God promises, God will do. In His time. According to his plan. For our good and for His glory.

You may be waiting for God to do something you long for Him to do, something for which you have been praying and waiting for a long time. You may feel like you have been waiting forever, that God is taking forever to answer the deepest, most impassioned prayers of your heart. You have to understand that God doesn't always answer our prayers *when* we want, and He doesn't always answer our prayers *the way* we want, which means He doesn't always give us *what* we want. His ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9). At the same time, God is and will always be faithful to His promises (Psalm 145:13). He is faithful forever. His steadfast love for you is just that. It is steadfast. It will never change.

Understand this, as you are waiting for God to act: As long as the clock is still ticking, it is not over yet. God may be silent at the moment, but by no means does His silence mean that He is doing nothing. Or that He will not act when the time is right. As long as time remains, don't give up on God. Don't stop trusting in God. Don't stop praying for whatever burden God has placed on your heart. Give God time. He operates on His own schedule, not yours. But, always, be careful not to confuse your own desires with God's promises or plans.

God does not bless every childless couple with a late-in-life child, as He blessed Zechariah and Elizabeth (and, before them, Abraham and Sarah). Zechariah and Elizabeth had to endure years – decades – of disappointment and heartache and even disgrace (Luke 1:25). In those days, in the Jewish culture, no couple would choose to be childless, the way many couples do in our culture today. To be childless was a source of sadness and often shame, because childlessness was often seen as a sign of God's judgment for personal sin in the lives of a husband and wife.

Luke makes it clear, though, that this was not the case for Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were both devoted to God. No one could question the sincerity and depth of their faith in God

and their commitment to a life, a faithful obedience to the Lord and His commandments. Elizabeth's inability to conceive a child was not a punishment from God for some sin in her life or Zechariah's. Their situation simply shows that even godly, devout, faithful, right-living servants of God or – more to the point for us – followers of Jesus still experience disappointment and heartache and pain in this life. No one is exempt.

That God chose to bless Zechariah and Elizabeth with a son late in life, when, as Zechariah said, he was an old man and Elizabeth his wife was well advanced in years, is a sign of God's sovereign power, mercy, and favor (or grace). It was all part of God's plan – not just to bless this dear older couple with a joyous answer to their long-prayed prayers but also to bless His people Israel and the whole world with the Savior He had promised to send when the time was just right.

I realize I haven't explained exactly what the genealogical connection between Jesus and John was. You may already know it. John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, both came from priestly families. They both belonged to the tribe of Levi and, more specifically, were descendants of Moses' brother Aaron, to whom and to whose descendants the privileges and responsibilities of the priesthood were given.

On the other hand, both Mary the mother of Jesus and Joseph His supposed father were from the tribe of Judah. They traced their ancestry back to King David and through him to Judah. At some point, however, the families of Mary and Elizabeth intermarried, for Gabriel, in Luke 1:36, refers to Elizabeth as Mary's relative. The Bible doesn't tell us how closely they were related. But it seems reasonable to conclude that they were cousins. Which means that their sons, Jesus and John, were cousins.

When Zechariah got his voice back, after his own extended period of silence – nine months in which he could communicate only by sign language or by using his iPad (or its 1<sup>st</sup> century equivalent) – he sang his song of praise to God. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied about his son John:

“And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High” – remember, there hadn't been a prophet in more than 400 years, not since Malachi – and not only a prophet but the forerunner to the Messiah, “to go on before the Lord and to prepare the way for Him,” and to tell people about the coming “of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God” (1:76-78a).

That is what John came to do. That was his mission from God. He could not save people from their sins. He was not the Savior. But, like Elijah before him, he would call people to repentance. He would urge people to turn away from their sins and turn back to God. Though he could not forgive their sins, he would point people to the One who could.

The witness of John still points us to the Savior today. Through his witness he still calls us to repent of our sins and to trust wholly in the only One who can save us, the only One who has the authority and power to forgive our sins, the only One who can rightly claim to be Lord and King and Sovereign in your life.

Is Jesus your King? Is He Lord in your life? Is He your Sovereign and your Savior?

John prepared the way. He did his job. Then he got out of the way. And Jesus did the job He came to do – to incarnate the fullness of God and as an expression of His love to offer Himself as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Who could ask for more? If you've been running from God, if you've been resisting God, if you've been trying to keep God at a distance, if you're trying to run your own life, it's time to stop. It's time to surrender. It's time to come home to the Savior who loves you and gave Himself for you. It's time to receive Him. It's time to accept the gift of salvation and forgiveness and peace. Do it today. And, even though it is just the beginning of Advent, it will be Christmas in your heart.

Lord, let it be so in every heart. Amen.