

# MYSTERY IN THE AIR

LUKE 1:57-66

*God's Ways May Be Mysterious, But They Are Undeniable.*

## **I. A Strange Birth (Vs 57-58)**

Godly People Are A Cause For Great Rejoicing.

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# Mystery In The Air

Luke 1:57-66

I would like to remind us that Luke removed Mary from the scene last week by saying that Mary remained with Elizabeth for 3 months and returned home. If Mary went to visit Elizabeth during her sixth month of pregnancy, then I'm assuming that Mary witnessed the birth of John and then went home. If we keep in mind that Luke is paralleling the births of John and Jesus we can see why he did it. This week, he will describe the birth of John. Next week he will describe Zechariah's response to God. Then Luke will go into the narrative that describes the birth of Jesus.

This past week, my friend reminded me that C.S. Lewis, in his book *Miracles* says that for people who don't believe in miracles, no amount of proof will convince them. For people who do believe in miracles, no proof is necessary. As we see the mysterious hand of God at work in this morning's passage, I want to encourage us to be on the lookout for God's mysterious hand in our lives. That's the way I want us to approach the events in the Gospel of Luke. The God of the Old Testament is the same God of the New Testament. He is still God today, and as far as I know, He doesn't have any retirement plans.

This morning, we are going to see some strange events that can only point to God's work and design. God always has surprises for us. He even has surprises for skeptics.

There was a skeptic who was an avid golfer. He wasn't so skeptical that he ruled out the existence of God and miracles. Therefore, while visiting Italy, he got an audience with the pope. He was very polite. He bowed and even kissed the hem of the pope's robe. He said, "Your Holiness, I have a question that only you could possibly answer. Is there a golf course in Heaven?" The pope blessed the man and replied, "My son, I will pray about it and give you an answer tomorrow." Sure enough, the next morning, the hotel porter brought him a note. It was from the pope himself. The note read, "My son, I have good news and bad news. Heaven has the most fantastic golf course you could ever imagine. It is always in perfect condition and is perfectly manicured. The weather is always ideal and the greens play like a dream. The bad news for you however, is that you have an 11 o'clock tee time for this morning."

Again, like I said earlier, even the most skeptical person would have to say there are a lot of strange things going on here in the first chapter of Luke. What a way to start out the Gospel. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **GOD'S WAYS MAY BE MYSTERIOUS, BUT THEY ARE UNDENIABLE.** The people in today's text had a basic belief in God. In particular, they are Jews. Even though they did not quite grasp the meaning of these strange and wonderful events, they knew something supernatural was involved.

## I. A STRANGE BIRTH

In verses 57-58, they witnessed a strange birth. Here is something for us to remember. **GODLY PEOPLE ARE A CAUSE FOR GREAT REJOICING.** The thing I want us to remember is that if

we are godly people living godly lives, we have the potential to bring a lot of joy to a lot of people.

I know that when we want something, we get impatient and we want it right away. When we are suffering, we want relief right away. If what we want to happen doesn't happen right away, we become anxious. However, Luke reminds us in verse 57 that God's plans unfold according to God's timing. If someone were to just read verse 57 without much background, it seems relatively normal. To say when the 9-month gestation period was over, a mother gave birth to a son is nothing out of the ordinary. However, when we take time to review the circumstances surrounding this birth, we discover that there is nothing ordinary about it. In fact, according to natural circumstances, this birth should not even be. I want to be conservative with the data Luke has given us. Elizabeth, being totally past menopause, is probably in her sixties. Zachariah is probably close to seventy. Can you imagine a couple in their retirement years having a baby? Even by today's standards, doctors would refer to this birth as a miracle birth.

God could have given Zachariah and Elizabeth children while they were in their twenties. But God doesn't date things according to human biology or human convenience. God dates things spiritually. We know that John will play an important part in Jesus' ministry. Jesus was going to be born approximately six months after John. Therefore God determined John's date of birth according to the time Jesus would enter the world. God chose Mary to give birth to Jesus and He determined that Elizabeth, Mary's relative, who was married to a priest, would be the mother of John. It just so happened that Zachariah was close to 70 and Elizabeth was in her sixties. Superseding human biology is no problem for God. He wanted Zachariah and Elizabeth to be John's parents and He wanted John to be born at this particular time so here we have a woman in her sixties giving birth to a son. This truly is a remarkable verse.

Human joy is one thing, but God's joy is quite another as described in verse 58. Let's address the human joy first. In his commentary on Luke, William Barclay describes the traditions of the time. Perspective parents had musicians waiting outside the door as the mother gave birth. If the child was a boy, they would strike up the band and there would be a big celebration. If a girl was born, the musicians would just disappear quietly and go home. There was a saying at the time, "The birth of a male child causes universal joy, but the birth of a female causes universal sorrow." So it would be natural for her neighbors and relatives to share her joy.

However, there is cause for godly joy here. Zachariah and Elizabeth had prayed for years to have a child. It was considered a disgrace not to have children and couples who didn't have children we considered to be cursed by God. But now, well past their childbearing age, God showed them great mercy and blessed them with the birth of a boy. This word great mercy is a translation of the Hebrew word *Hesed* which is often translated loving-kindness. This is a rich and powerful word in Hebrew. It is used in the context of God's covenant relationship with His people. It describes the faithfulness and love that is supposed to be characteristic of the relationship. However, since we as humans are always unfaithful, the word often describes God's unmerited love towards us. And it usually describes an act of love rather than simply a disposition of love. In other words, God is showing His covenantal love towards Zachariah, Elizabeth, and the nation of Israel. Further, we could say that this is the beginning of God inviting all people to a covenantal relationship with Him through the birth of John.

As we have said earlier, John is going to be both a blessing to his parents and to the nation of Israel. John will become the herald of the Good News that God is sending His Son to offer this loving-kindness to all. The Gospel of John describes it like this:

*“16“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16 / NLT).*

The birth of John is going to be the beginning of this new covenant God will establish with human beings. Elizabeth and Zachariah were godly people and through Zachariah’s ministry at the temple many people were blessed. In giving birth to John, Elizabeth is going to be the source of much blessing.

Did you ever stop to think about this? If we come to understand that God has given us the job of being His ambassadors, and if we pursue holiness in our own personal lives and the life of our church, we can become a blessing to all sorts of people in so many different ways. People can come to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior if we are faithful to our calling as evangelists. People can be healed if we take seriously our calling to minister to those who are in need. We have incredible potential to bring incredible joy to people we come in contact with because we can share the loving-kindness of God with them. There is no doubt about this point. **GODLY PEOPLE ARE A CAUSE FOR GREAT REJOICING.**

## II. A STRANGE NAME

As we stop and think about it, this has been a strange birth. In verses 59-63, this new baby will be given a strange name. What we will come to see here is this. **GODLY PEOPLE ARE DISPENSERS OF GOD’S GRACE.**

In verses 59-60 we are reminded that this is an important name. We have to keep that fact that Zachariah can’t speak in mind. On the eighth day of this little boy’s life, Jewish law required him to be circumcised in a religious ceremony. It was required to name a baby within the first 30 days of being born. Sometimes the babies were named at birth. Sometimes the babies were named at this event. In taking the baby to the temple to have him circumcised, Zachariah and Elizabeth were dedicating their son to God. In other words, they had dedicated their lives to serving God and they were giving their baby to God as a member of the covenant God made with the Jews. This baby was a member of the Jewish covenant because of his parent’s relationship with God. That is something we Christian parents must never forget. Our children stand in a special relationship because of our faith. The best thing we can do for our children is to live holy lives before God. God states it clearly in the Ten Commandments:

*“5You must never worship or bow down to (idols) them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not share your affection with any other god! I do not leave unpunished the sins of those who hate me, but I punish the children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generations. 6But I lavish my love on those who love me and obey my commands, even for a thousand generations” (Exodus 20:5-6 / NLT).*

What better gift could we give to our children that God would lavish His love on them because of our obedience and faithfulness to Him?

Circumcision was a big deal. There would be the religious ceremony and then a big party. Zachariah and Elizabeth’s friends and family assumed they would name the baby Zechariah. Perhaps they started even calling the baby Zechariah or Junior. But Elizabeth spoke up and said no. The baby was to be named John. Now the name John in Hebrew is Han and it means grace. It is the shortened form of Yehohanan which means either Yahweh’s gift or Yahweh is gracious. Let me just point this out. Zachariah and Elizabeth did not name the baby John. God named this

baby John. If you remember, the angel Gabriel told Zachariah the baby's name would be John. And further, we said that Hebrew names described the nature, character, or mission of the person. John will introduce God's gracious gift of salvation to the world, namely the incarnate Jesus. John will prepare people's hearts to receive Jesus. What an incredible name and what an incredible mission.

Do you know that Jesus has pet names for each of us? Listen to what Jesus says in the book of Revelation:

*"17"Anyone who is willing to hear should listen to the Spirit and understand what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Everyone who is victorious will eat of the manna that has been hidden away in heaven. And I will give to each one a white stone, and on the stone will be engraved a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it" (Revelation 2:17 / NLT).*

Jesus gives us this encouragement in the context of remaining faithful to the teachings of Scripture. Isn't it nice to know that even though Jesus is the King of the universe, He knows us personally by a pet name He gives us, and gives us special assignments in life? Our names are important to Jesus, important enough to write them down in the Book of Life.

All these promises are great. But just as verses 61-63 describe an important act of obedience, we must remember that we access God's blessings through obedience. Verses 61 and 62 illustrate one of the reasons I love to read the Bible. The Bible captures human nature perfectly. It doesn't matter if it's a baptism, a wedding, a funeral, or just throwing a party, there are always well meaning friends and relatives around you telling you what you have to do. You should sing this song. You should seat this person next to this person. You have to do this ceremony this way and that ceremony that way. Pretty soon, you feel as the event has been taken out of your control.

People are well meaning, but they are often annoying and may carry you away from what you want. Elizabeth has already firmly said no to naming the baby Zachariah and she firmly told them the baby's name was to be John. Now these well meaning people start to argue with her. They inform her that none of her relatives are named John as if Elizabeth didn't know that. Elizabeth isn't budging. So thinking that she had lost her mind, these well meaning people go and bother Zachariah. Poor Zachariah can't even talk so they start making signs to him. Now please don't miss how stupid these people are. They are making signs to Zachariah. Hello, he's mute. He's not deaf. His hearing is fine.

Let me take this time to warn all of us about well meaning people. Well meaning people will be good listeners and help you to work through your thought process. Most time, well meaning people want to give others advice when their own lives are a mess and in shambles. Please learn to say no to these well meaning people in a firm but polite way. Zachariah and Elizabeth knew God's will and they were standing firm in it. Even though Zachariah was mute, and yet he speaks volumes in his silence. He motioned for a writing tablet and he wrote, "His name is John." This was not up for debate or discussion. God told Elizabeth and Zachariah the baby's name would be John and to the astonishment of everyone around, they obeyed God and named the baby John.

Is that something we are willing to do? Our friends and family are always ready to give us advice for what we should say and do. Let me just lay out some practical advice for all of us. First of all, be reading and studying the Bible regularly. God's will for our lives is clearly

spelled out in the Bible. Be polite when people give us advice. In other words, it's good for us to listen and hear what people are saying. Here is the most important point. Weigh what people say and compare it to what the Bible says. As we read and study the Bible, as we pray and submit ourselves before God, we will know His will for our lives. We need to make our decisions based on the truths of Scripture and not to be swayed by human opinions. As we do this, we like Zachariah, Elizabeth, and their son John will become a blessing to the community. **GODLY PEOPLE ARE DISPENSERS OF GOD'S GRACE.** When you come to think of it, that's a pretty awesome responsibility we have as children of God.

### III. A STRANGE RESULT

God has chosen to bless the world through us. And as we will witness now, if we obey God and fulfill our destinies, a strange result will appear as described in verses 64-66. In other words, **GODLY PEOPLE BECOME OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOD TO WORK.** I know that we don't spend much time thinking about this because even in our Christian lives we tend to focus on God meeting our needs. God told Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed through the Jews. The angel told Zachariah that his newborn son would bring great joy to the world. We know that Mary's Son brought God's offer of reconciliation to the world. And the Apostle Paul reminds us that we are God's ambassadors to the world. There is no other plan. We are the ones who are to bring God's message of salvation to unbelievers. We are the ones who are to bring God's healing and wholeness to this lost and hurting world. We are to bring God's touch to one another. But in order for these things to happen, we must be obedient.

Verse 64 illustrates the fact that obedience brings healing. For over 9 months, Zachariah has been unable to speak. He has been muted partially as a rebuke for his initial unbelief, but secondly as a sign that what was promised by God would come to be. Zachariah has just written down on a tablet that the child's name would be John. This is a direct act of obedience to God's command.

And it says that "immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed." This act of obedience became an opportunity for God to heal Zachariah. I want to emphasize this point. Not every person that is sick or suffering is experiencing these things because of sin in their life or because God is disciplining them. However, since we all sin, it is good for us to take these opportunities to examine the sin in our lives and ask God The Holy Spirit to point out the sinful behaviors in our lives that we need to get rid of.

However, there are many occasions that we get sick and suffer as a direct result of sin. The Apostle Paul informed the church at Corinth that many of them were getting sick and dying as a result of taking communion in an unworthy manner. There are some people who experience sickness and suffering as a direct result of sin in their lives. I would like to remind us of a very important lesson here in this verse. They were in the context of worshiping God in the circumcision ceremony of John. When Zachariah made a clear act of obedience in the context of this worship, he was healed. Every Sunday we gather here to worship God. Every worship service is an opportunity to say yes to God and to be healed. There is no doubt. Worship services are opportunities to be healed through obedience.

Look what Zachariah does with his healing. He started to praise God. I think that many times when we are going through suffering, we tend to get focused on God like a laser, which is good. However, when we are delivered and the suffering passes, we tend to go back to business as

usual, and our relationship with God is often relegated to a lower place on our priority list. Let's expect to see healing in our worship services. Let us be prepared to praise God and let us go from this place with a new or renewed commitment to live for God.

Verse 65 also reminds us that obedience brings faith. Everybody present at this ceremony saw the miracles that God was performing. A couple advanced far beyond their childbearing age were circumcising their very own baby. That was a miracle. They now saw Zachariah's affliction healed. Please don't miss this. All their neighbors have seen them and are present at this worship service. And let me now quote from the NASB because I think they capture the Greek meaning the best here. "And fear came upon all those living around them." The NIV says they were "filled with awe."

The NLT says "wonder fell upon" them. The word in Greek is phobos. It is the word we get the English word phobia from. The sense here is that a holy fear overtook them. To be sure, this fear is filled with awe and wonder, but it is fear nevertheless. I can remember one such instance in my life where this type of fear overtook me. In seminary, we prayed before classes and we prayed before our functions. It was simply a habit. However, one night was different.

Dallas Willard invited a few of us students up to his apartment for some informal discussion pertaining to our class. We all bowed our heads, there was a long pause of silence and Dallas began to pray with these words, "Your Majesty." I can't begin to tell you the fear that fell upon me at that moment. I was frightened, but in a good way. There was no way I could speak or do anything else. I didn't even hear the rest of his prayer. I just knew I was in the presence of God in a very special and holy way. Listen, when we start to take our walk in Christ seriously, He will show up in ways that will cause this type of holy fear to fall upon those around us and they will come to faith in Jesus Christ. We have an awesome and fearful responsibility to live in obedience to Christ. People couldn't stop talking about what God did. It became a topic of conversation in the village. And it seems as if the story spread throughout the region.

And verse 66 illustrates that obedience brings hope. There is no doubt here. God is on the move. Could it be that God was now going to usher in the Messianic Age? Was God about to deliver Israel from her enemies? The text says that "everyone who heard this wondered." Literally it says that everyone who heard these things held them in their hearts. It's almost as if they kept mulling over these events. It drove them to ask what John was going to grow up to be because God's hand was all over him and it seemed as if God's hand remained on him. With the miraculous signs that surrounded John's birth, they knew this was extraordinary. This gave them hope for the future. To be sure, Zachariah and Elizabeth would have a son to care for them. But more importantly, this child was going to bring hope to the nation of Israel.

For the Christian, hope is intimately tied up with faith. Listen to how the author of Hebrews states this:

*"What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see" (Hebrews 11:1 / NLT).*

This type of hope is not wishful thinking. This type of hope is the eager anticipation that God will do what He has promised to do. When we live obedient lives, God builds hope in us and the people around us. Biblical hope is being confident that God will complete the good work He started in each one of us and God will manifest His love and power through us the church. This will happen in many ways. In this morning's text it came through miracles of healing. However, we know that God will also do this when it comes time for us to undergo persecution and

suffering. But the end result will be the same. Our faith and hope will grow as we obey Him even in times of suffering. This is how the Apostle Paul put it:

*“3We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they are good for us—they help us learn to endure. 4And endurance develops strength of character in us, and character strengthens our confident expectation of salvation. 5And this expectation will not disappoint us. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.*

*6When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners”  
(Romans 5:3-6 / NLT).*

Our hope here is described as confident expectation. Our hope is not wishful thinking because our hope is tied up in the ministry and power of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. We know that we will become all God wants us to be. We know that evil will attack the church and we also know that Jesus will return to defeat evil once and for all. When you come to think of it, our times are very much like the world in which John and Jesus were born into. The birth of John gave great hope to those who witnessed the miracles. We as Christ’s messengers should also be a beacon of hope to those who are searching for meaning in life. **GODLY PEOPLE BECOME OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOD TO WORK.** As we live out our faith in joyful obedience, we will allow God to heal people around us and to bring the gift of faith and hope to a lost and hurting world. We should not be surprised to see God working all sorts of stuff in us and through us. **GOD’S WAYS MAY BE MYSTERIOUS, BUT THEY ARE UNDENIABLE.**

I really do hope and pray that all of us here exhibit that kind of godly obedience in our lives and I hope that when we gather here for worship, we will come with an expectation that God will work in us and through us. Here is what William Temple says about worship:

*“[Worship is] to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open up the heart to the love of God, to devote that will to the purpose of God.”*

If we come to worship with these attitudes, there is no telling what kinds of stuff God will do here.