

**Theme:** Characters of Christmas

**Title:** And So It Began – Luke 1:57-80

**Aim:** Explore the characters of Zechariah & John the Baptist.

**Intro:** AND SO IT BEGAN. Prophecy of the birth & ministry of Christ is found throughout the OT, from the 1<sup>st</sup> book, Genesis (3:15) to the last OT book, Malachi (3:1 & 4:5-6) & many prophecies in between. In Genesis 3:15 we're given the promise that God would "***put enmity between [the serpent – Satan] & the woman & between your offspring (seed); He (seed of the woman, which would be Jesus) shall bruise your head & you (Satan) shall bruise His heel.***" Jesus came to crush the work of the evil one. In Malachi, God declared thru the prophet (3:1): "***Behold I send My messenger, & he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple; & the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, He is coming, says the Lord of hosts.***" The Lord whom Israel was seeking & the messenger of the covenant is Jesus, who came to His temple – essentially the whole earth & His people, but also the temple in Jerusalem, 1<sup>st</sup> as a baby to be circumcised, then as Messiah, ushering in the covenant of grace as He came to live/die for us. The 1<sup>st</sup> messenger Malachi wrote about was one who would "prepare the way before" the messenger of the covenant, the Lord Jesus. That 1<sup>st</sup> messenger is spoken about also in 4:5-6 – "***Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great & awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children & the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come & strike the land w/a decree of utter destruction.***" John the Baptist was that one like Elijah, as we shall see. But after Malachi wrote his prophecy, 400 years passed between the testaments (old & new). There were 400 years of silence & darkness. Israel was ruled by the Persians, then the Greeks & then for most of that time by the Romans, & it wasn't a pleasant life. Where was the promised

Messiah? Where was God? There was no prophetic word from God throughout those 400 years. The next word that would come was the Living Word of God as recorded in chap1 of the gospel of John, who wrote that “the Word became flesh & dwelt among us” (1:14). As far as the NT is concerned, the promise of Christ’s coming began to be realized when a priest was visited by an angel in the temple. Dr. Luke, a man of detail, picked up on Malachi’s prophecy & wrote an account of the birth of John the Baptist, who was the one like Elijah who was to come before the Messiah & would prepare the way before Him. AND SO IT BEGAN. For the next few weeks leading up to Christmas, we want to visit some of the minor characters of Christmas. We know about Mary & Joseph & certainly the Lord Jesus, but what about others who certainly were important figures in the Christmas account? Today’s “character” is probably the most obscure: Zechariah. We can read his story in Luke 1, beginning w/vs5 & ending at vs80, w/a very significant & familiar interlude (Mary). We’ll only read a part of that passage & tell the story of the rest. Zechariah was a priest. Even in the time of darkness & silence, the Jews kept tradition & worshipped God & were longing for the coming of the Messiah – at least some of them. Zechariah’s wife’s name was Elizabeth. Luke records that both of them were “righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments & statutes of the Lord.” They were faithful. How do you/I compare? But they had no child. Elizabeth was barren & they were both old. Zachariah was serving as priest & was chosen to enter the temple & burn incense – an offering to God, representing the worship/prayers of the people. While he was carrying out his duty, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zachariah & assured him that his prayers for Elizabeth & a child had been heard. God would enable them to conceive & they would have a son, to be named John. Obviously, this child would be a special son, if God’s messenger was announcing it – the same

messenger/angel who appeared to Mary just months later to announce the birth of the Christ. Gabriel announced that John would be “great before the Lord,” set apart for a special purpose – vs16-17. **“And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, & he will go before Him (the Lord) in the spirit & power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, & the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”** He would be the one Isaiah prophesied about (40:3) – **“A voice cries, ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”** John the Baptist would be the forerunner of Christ. But Zechariah doubted the message, even tho an angel had delivered it. Gabriel said to him, “I stand in God’s presence & was sent to speak to you personally. Now you will be unable to speak until the child is born, because you didn’t believe.” After this Zachariah went out of the temple, but he couldn’t speak, so he couldn’t tell the people what had happened. Sure enough, Elizabeth conceived & rejoiced that God had graciously blessed her. When she was 6 mos pregnant she had a visitor, a cousin or niece, Mary by name, who had also received a visit from this same Gabriel, announcing that she would be the mother of the very Son of God. We read that when Mary entered Elizabeth’s house, the baby leaped in Elizabeth’s womb! It was revealed to Elizabeth that Mary’s baby would indeed be the Messiah! The lives of those 2 boys would be tightly interwoven. Luke 1:57-80 [READ]. When it came time for Zachariah & Elizabeth’s baby to be born, all rejoiced w/them, & when it was time to circumcise & name him, everyone assumed he would be named after his father, but Elizabeth said “No! His name is John!” While they argued w/her, Zachariah asked for a writing tablet & wrote upon it, “his name is John!” Immediately his tongue was loosed & he was able to tell them all that had happened. Probably couldn’t shut him up! Luke recorded that the people wondered, “What will this child

be?” Some probably thought maybe this was the Messiah. Then Zachariah prophesied. I) He spoke 1<sup>st</sup> of God. **God has visited us w/redemption**. That word visited means “looked upon or examined in order to see how one is, in order to help, care for.” From of old, God saw the plight of His people, of mankind. He had a plan to meet that need. **God has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David**. In those days a horn was a symbol of strength & courage, a source of deliverance (think of a horn being born to muster troops & start a battle. Of course, David was the most beloved king of Israel. God brought the Messiah to the world thru the house/lineage of David. The Messiah, Jesus, would be the deliverer/Savior, delivering His people (all who believe) from captivity & oppression of the enemy (Satan/sin) “that we...might serve Him w/out fear.” We’re set free to serve God & are enabled to do so. **God would show mercy & remember His holy covenant**. This was the covenant He made to Abraham, to bless the world thru his offspring, who would be Jesus. II) Then Zechariah prophesied regarding his son, John. **He would be called the prophet of the Most High** – no small calling. **He would go before the Lord to prepare His ways**. That word prepare means to make ready, make necessary preparations. The meaning is drawn from the oriental custom of sending people before kings on their journeys to level the roads & make them passible.” John the Baptist would be sent “to prepare the minds of people to give the Messiah a fit reception & to secure His blessings.” **His mission was to “give knowledge of salvation & forgiveness because of God’s mercy**. John called the people to repentance & told them of the One who was coming. **He was to be an instrument of light**, pointing to the Messiah, guiding them “into the way of peace!” In reality, you & I are to be like John the Baptist, pointing others to Jesus, making known to them the provision of salvation & forgiveness. We’re to be forerunners of Christ’s 2<sup>nd</sup> coming, preparing

the way before Him. We are to be light bearers for those who still yet sit in darkness & in the shadow of death. We have good news to share. Zachariah was an obscure priest who would not have been noticed had it not been for an angel visit & a promise made. You don't have to be well known to make difference in a hurting world. The real difference maker is the Savior Jesus Christ. We just need to point others to Him, living our lives in such a way that others will see Him in us.