

John the Baptist

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[0 : 0 0] Today, we are celebrating the gift of a child. Luke Alexander was born six months ago, in fact, exactly six months ago. But his life began some nine months before, when he was conceived in his mother's womb. And this morning, I want to think about this wonderful time in the life of a child from conception, the early months of growth and development in the womb, and the birth as the child emerges from the womb into the world. And we'll do so by considering the account that we're given in the first chapter of Luke's gospel of the conception, life in the womb, and birth of John the Baptist. We're told of three distinct moments during those nine months. The moment of conception, one particular moment in the life of John in the womb of Elizabeth, and the moment of his birth, and the immediate days that followed. And these three moments we want to think about this morning. And as we think of these three moments, we will consider as our overarching, happy theme, our God-giving God, our giving God, and what He gives, and what gifts are particularly illustrated in these three moments. So, we think of the first moment that we mentioned, the moment of conception, the gift of life. We can read again the verses that we find there in verse 24, in Luke chapter 1 and verse 24. After this, his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. And very especially these words, the Lord has done this for me, she said.

In these days, he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people. We know something of the circumstances of this remarkable conception. We've read the passage, Zechariah and Elizabeth were, in the words of Luke, both well on in years. And Elizabeth was certainly beyond any possibility of conceiving and giving birth. But then, Zechariah received a strange and yet wonderful angelic message. We've read the words of the angel recorded for us in verse 13, "Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son." And Zechariah was, I'm sure, quick to share the good news with his wife. And as anticipated by the angel, we are then told that after this, his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant. And our interest is to simply consider Elizabeth's response to the miracle being experienced within her very own body. We have read her words, "The Lord has done this for me."

In these days, he has shown his favor. Elizabeth recognizes that the life conceived in her womb is a gift, a gift from God, the gift of life. A gift for Zechariah and Elizabeth, and we could add, a gift to John. John is given the gift of life. And what do these words?

All of Elizabeth, tell us concerning our life-giving God. Well, I think we can say the following. First of all, they speak of his power to create and to give life. This is what Elizabeth recognizes.

The Lord has done this for me. It is the Lord's doing that she finds herself with child. It is God's work.

[4 : 1 8] He is the one who has the power to create, the power to give life. And so, these words, the Lord has done this for me, speak of his power to create and to give life. But they speak also of his personal involvement in the giving of life. This is not simply a God who establishes the way things are to be and then allows things to take their course. No, Elizabeth is able to say, the Lord has done this for me. She's very conscious that this is a personal gift from her personal God.

This is God personally dealing with Elizabeth and giving to her this wonderful gift of a child. The Lord has done this for me. But the words of Elizabeth also speak of the love and favor of God that his giving of life is evidence of. You see, Elizabeth not only glories in the power of God to create and to give life, she not only is able to recognize his personal involvement in her own life and in her own conception, the conception of her child. But she also recognizes that this is evidence of God's love and favor. He has shown his favor. He has shown his favor to me. He loves me.

He cares for me. And he has shown his love in this particularly wonderful way, in the granting of a child. And as that was true of John the Baptist. So, we can also say today that the conception of Luke Alexander also serves to reveal this same life-giving God. His parents, Robin Ann, can with Elizabeth declared, the Lord has done this for us. He has shown us his favor in the giving of life to Luke Alexander. God has shown his favor to Robin Ann, to Hannah, and to Luke Alexander himself. The moment of conception, the gift of life.

I also want to move on to a second moment that we have recorded for us, a very exciting and intriguing record. The moment in the moment in the womb. And this thrilling moment recorded by Luke illustrates another gift or gifts granted by God, what we might call the gift of identity and the gift of spiritual life. We know the story well. Mary arrives at the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth and is met by Elizabeth. And on hearing the words of greeting pronounced by Mary, the baby leaps in Elizabeth's womb.

We read of how that occurs there in verse 41, when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaps in her womb. Now, that in itself would be remarkable if it were the means by which the joy of Elizabeth found expression in some mysterious way. But the explanation that Elizabeth gives is much more remarkable and profoundly revealing. What Elizabeth explains is that it is the baby himself who leapt for joy. Notice what she says very explicitly in verse 44, This is not Elizabeth's joy that is being described. Now, clearly, Elizabeth shared in this joyful moment.

[8 : 34] Clearly, Elizabeth rejoiced in what was occurring. But what we are speaking of here and what Elizabeth speaks of here is very clearly and particularly the joy of her child. It is John who leaps for joy.

And we can go even further and say this, that it was John's leaping for joy that first enabled Elizabeth to understand who Mary was to understand who Mary was and the identity of the child she bore.

The leaping for joy communicated to Elizabeth this wonderful truth of who was before her and of the child that she bore. Now, some have found this hard to accept, that Luke, or that rather John, in his mother's womb, could experience joy could experience joy. Even John Colvin states the following, and I quote, Luke does not say that the feeling belonged to the child. But actually, he does. And more importantly, this is precisely what Elizabeth, and note, full of the Holy Spirit, affirms.

What Elizabeth is enabled to do with the help of the Holy Spirit is to interpret the movement of her child as the expression of her unborn baby's joy. John, in his mother's womb, rejoices in Jesus.

Now, what all of this reveals is God's gift to John of personal identity and spiritual life. The actions of John, leaping for joy, allow for no other conclusion. The one occupying Elizabeth's womb is not an impersonal fetus, not just a part of Elizabeth's body, not even just a physical life.

[10 : 42] He, and I stress, he is a person. He is John. But there is more. He is a person endowed with spiritual life, a person in relationship with Jesus and capable of rejoicing in Jesus.

Now, even if all that is conceded or recognized as a fair description of what we have before us, it could be asked, is this not an altogether unique and unrepeatable phenomenon of John in his mother's womb leaping for joy? And if it is a unique and unrepeatable phenomenon, would it not be the case that we cannot draw conclusions from it with regard to the gift of identity and spiritual life to a child today, particularly with regard to the timing of that gift of identity and spiritual life? Now, it is clearly the case that John, leaping for joy in his mother's womb, is not normative for life in the womb. But what it does establish, or more than establish, what it does confirm, is the Bible's clear teaching that life in the womb is personal life. Personal identity is not assumed at birth. It predates birth and indeed can be traced to conception. We can read

Psalm 139 where this truth is expressed both beautifully and eloquently. And if you just turn with me quickly to Psalm 139, and we'll read verses 13 to 16. Here the psalmist speaks of life in the womb, of his own life in his mother's womb. And what does he say? For you created my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful. I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place.

When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. Very especially there in verse 16. David is able to say, your eyes saw my unformed body. And these words speak of relationship. They speak of God not only seeing but knowing, of not only knowing but loving. That look is a look of love, a look that without words announces that the one looked upon is of great value, is precious, is loved.

And what is being looked upon? My unformed body, an embryo, a human life in those first hours or days or weeks following conception. But that embryo, that unformed body, and long before it is capable even of leaping, is a person, has a name, is known by God, is loved by God, is in relationship with God.

[14 : 13] You see, what grants us value, what grants us humanity, what grants us personality, what grants us identity, even in the womb, is not to be measured as we would be told by the extent of our physical development, to be recognizably human, to possess a developed nervous system, or the capacity to feel pain, the potential for independent life out with the womb, whatever that is. No, what makes us truly and precious people truly and precious human is to be known by God, to be known by God. That is what grants us our identity. And with regard specifically to the spiritual life of John that is revealed to us in the account that we've read, his leaping for joy evidences that. What that does is serve to establish certainly the capacity or the potential for embryonic spiritual life. That is not to say that every child is granted such spiritual life in the womb. The granting of this gift, both within and outwith the womb, lies in the gracious prerogative of God. And what of Luke Alexander, who today will be baptized, will be baptized? Well, he too has been granted the gift of personal identity, a gift granted to him by God in the womb of his mother. What of spiritual life? Well, he is a covenant child, a member of the family of God. And who's to say that he has not been gifted spiritual life by his heavenly father. We certainly look forward to early evidence of such life, of early evidence of rejoicing in Jesus.

We look forward not only to Luke Alexander receiving spiritual instruction from his parents, but like John, serving to communicate spiritual truth and joy to his parents.

So, the moment of conception, the gift of life, the moment recorded for us of John there in his mother's womb, the gift of identity, the gift of spiritual life. But we have finally the gift or the moment of birth, the moment of birth. We've read of that from verse 57, when it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby. She gave birth to a son. And the moment of John's birth illustrates another wonderful gift of God, the gift of family. We read there in the following verse, in verse 58, that her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. They shared her joy. Oh, happy day in the hill country of Judea when this child was born. And God generously and graciously places us in families. Families are not just one of God's great ideas. They reflect the divine identity, the God who exists in family, who exists in three persons, Father, a Son, and Holy Spirit. The gift of family, and indeed the gift of friendship that is also alluded to here in this account of the child's birth. The gift of family, the gift of friendship, is a gift of God, and a gift that in His common or universal grace He grants to all. Now, it is the case, it is sadly the case, that we are very adept at destroying the gift. But the gift itself is a precious one to be cared for and nurtured. And we are all here part of families. And it is right and proper that we pause to consider what we are doing with this gift, that we also have been given. But the account of John's birth allows us to go further and highlight how John is blessed with the gift of family at a deeper and richer level. The gift of belonging to

God's family. You see, at the beginning of that part of the account in verse 57 and 58, there is reference to neighbors to neighbors and relatives to neighbors and relatives. And of course, this is a very joyful family scene that would be true of families across the world regardless of their own faith convictions.

But this gift of family is given a deeper element in what we then go on to read. Because in verse 59, we read, on the eighth day, they came to circumcise the child.

[19 : 28] It's interesting, just as an aside that I'm not going to develop, but just note that the they there curiously refers not to Zechariah and Elizabeth in the first instance, though they were obviously involved, but to the community that they were part of, the covenant community that they belong to. That is clear because they want to give the child the name Zechariah, and they have to be corrected. No, that isn't the name that he is to receive. But the ones who are involved in, participating in, taking the initiative, if you wish, together with the family for the circumcision of this child are this community of faith that they belong to. Now, what is it that is going to take place? Well, the child is going to be circumcised. Now, circumcision was central to God's covenant with His people.

And while we don't have time to deal in any depth with its significance, we can certainly read verses that we find in Genesis chapter 17 that serve as the institution of this particular sign. In Genesis chapter 17, we'll read verses 1 and 2, and then verses 9 to 13, and then briefly comment on them.

Genesis chapter 17, When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you, and will greatly increase your numbers. And then in verse 9, Then God said to Abraham, As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you, for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep. Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come, every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner, those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant.

Circumcision, as very clearly indicated there in the passage that we've read, was the sign of the covenant. This is the language used, the sign of the covenant, the sign that spoke of membership of God's covenant people, of God's chosen people, of God's family. And John is to receive the sign because as a covenant child, he was part of God's family. And this remains God's way today.

His covenant, as we have just read, is an everlasting covenant. And so, covenant children, the children of believers, like Luke Alexander, also receive the sign of the covenant, the sign of belonging to the family of God. No longer circumcision, but the new covenant equivalent of baptism. And this, happily, is what today is about. Luke Alexander has been given the gift of family, not just mom and dad and sister Hannah, not just even the extended family, some of whom are here this morning. But he, like John, is blessed with a bigger family, a more wonderful family in many ways, the gift of belonging to God's family. And so, we come, not simply the family, but we come as God's family to baptize Luke Alexander this morning.

[23 : 30] The gift of life, physical and spiritual. The gift of identity. The gift of family. Praise be to our giving God. Let us pray.

Let us pray.