

Joke: Five year old Johnny told his daddy he'd like to have a baby brother and offered to do whatever he could to help. His dad, a very bright 35 year old, paused for a moment and then replied, " I'll tell you what, Johnny, if you pray every day for two months for a baby brother I guarantee that God will give you one!"

Johnny responded eagerly to his dad's challenge and went to his bedroom early that night to start praying for a baby brother.

He prayed every night for a whole month but when he told his friends what he was doing they said that it wasn't possible to pray for a baby brother; it has never happened before. Being the believing young man he was, Johnny quit praying and after another month Johnny's mother went to the hospital. When she came back home, Johnny's parents called him into the bedroom. He cautiously walked into the room, not expecting to find anything, and there was a little bundle lying right next to his mother. His dad pulled back the blanket and there was not one baby brother, but two!! His mother had twins!

Johnny's dad looked down at him and said, "Now aren't you glad you prayed?"

Johnny hesitated a little and then looked up at his dad and said, "Yes, but aren't you glad I quit when I did?"

What would you do if you ever got more than you hoped or asked for? Is that even be possible?

Today I'd like to share with you a story of a man who got more than he ever hoped for.

Let's begin today by looking at Ephesians chapter 3 verse 20. Ephesians 3:20 (NIV) - ²⁰Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,

I want to talk this morning how God prepared the parents of this one named John that we started looking at last week.

Marks Gospel starts out this way. . .

Mark 1:1–4 (NIV) - The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, ²as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” — ³“a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ ” ⁴And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Mark talks about this forerunner who was going to prepare the way of the Messiah by quoting from the Prophet Isaiah. . .

Luke 1 also tells us the story of John, but the story doesn't even start with John, it begins with his father Zechariah.

Listen to this. . .

Luke 1:5–25 (NIV) ⁵In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. ⁸Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord

and burn incense. ¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. ¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” ¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.” ¹⁹ The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.” ²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. ²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ “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.”

Years ago, a man named Zechariah was given a privilege, a great privilege at that. One that he had prayed for, for most of his life.

What you need to understand, is that Zechariah was a priest, after the order of Abijah.

And twice a year, the sons of Abijah served for seven days, in the Temple.

They were in charge of the morning and evening sacrifices, so there were 14 opportunities for someone to light the incense on the sacred altar in the Holy Place of the Temple.

The Holy Place was the second-most-sacred place on the planet.

This Altar of Incense was located 2 feet from the Holy of Holies, which was, in case you were wondering, the most sacred place on the planet. Why? Because God Himself dwelt in the Holy of Holies.

Every morning a lot was drawn. A lottery of sorts, and every afternoon another was drawn. Each time, the winner got to enter the Holy Place and light incense on the Altar.

The privilege was so special, no priest was allowed to win the lottery twice. As a matter of fact, only once in your life time would you get the chance to enter the Holy Place. Only once.

In Numbers chapter 4, verse 3, Moses decreed

Numbers 4:3 (NIV) - ³Count all the men from thirty to fifty years of age who come to serve in the work at the tent of meeting.

Moses tells us that only priests between the ages of 30 and 50 could even make this sacrifice.

By the time this story gets written, Zechariah was nearing the age of 50 years old, 48 or 49 perhaps. We don't know for sure. But Luke told us in verse 7 he was very old. How old would you think that was?

What we do know is that his opportunity to enter the Holy Place and carry out his priestly duties was passing by him.

Year after year, Zechariah watched brothers and cousins win that lottery. One by one, they won. By this time, most eligible priests were many years his junior. Most of his peers had already entered.

Zechariah never won. His opportunity was almost done. He was a loser. Well, not really. But he felt like one.

Zechariah had only wanted this one thing for himself: since his teenage years and the beginning of his priestly training, he had wanted to be able to fulfill his purpose by honoring God with the incense.

- By entering the Holy Place,
- touching the Table of Showbread, which held the loaves that reminded everyone that God is the bread of life,
- and the Golden Lampstand, which showed that God is the light of the world.

By lighting the incense, Zechariah would be symbolically releasing the prayers of the people to breath heavenward its smoke.

Two weeks a year, twice a day: 14 times every year, Zechariah had a chance to win the lottery. 14 times a year, he was disappointed.

Zechariah had one other great hope. Daily he prayed to God for a son of his own. That too had never happened either. I can almost hear poor Zach praying wondering when or if the time would come. Proverbs 13:12 may have felt real to him for years.

Proverbs 13:12 (NIV): Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.

The opportunity for a child must be gone. Nobody has a child at 50. At least, nobody whose wife was “well along in years,” like Elizabeth. Ok maybe a Sarah but she laughed at thought as well.

Two great hopes. Two great disappointments.

Whether this was Zechariah’s last opportunity, or if he had two or three left, we don’t know. We just know that, like so many people, Zechariah was living a life of quiet disappointment.

- The things he wanted weren’t coming.
- The dreams he’d harbored were dying.

But then came this day.

Have you ever had a “this day?”

A day when your greatest prayers were answered? When your deepest dreams came true?

This was Zechariah’s day!

- His lot was chosen.
- His moment came.
- He got to enter the Temple.

- Zechariah, priest of the order of Abijah, got to enter the Holy Place and stand before the Altar of Incense, 2 feet from the Shekinah Glory of God Almighty.

I wonder if his feet were extra-cautious that day? Did he make sure he didn't trip on the paving stones, or catch his foot in his robe? Did he cradle the candle like a baby, making sure its flame didn't go out?

You weren't there. I wasn't there. But I'll bet if we had been, we would have seen a ridiculous smile on Zechariah's face: he was in the presence of the Holy One of Israel. After all his longing was fulfilled. Remember Proverbs?

We didn't see his face. We also didn't see the angel.

Because on this day, God not only made Zechariah's dream come true, He exceeded it! Instead of just lighting the incense and saying the prayer, God sent him a visitation: Gabriel – the great archangel who stands in the presence of the Lord!

Do you know the verse in the book of Ephesians? – Ephesians 3:20? I mentioned it earlier. It says, "God is able to do all we ask or imagine."

Do you believe that?

Zechariah believed that.

And many times, he imagined himself in the Holy Place – but he never imagined meeting an angel there.

Actually, Ephesians 3:20 doesn't say that "God is able to do all we ask or imagine." It says He is able to do "above all we ask or imagine." And that's what God did this day.

Because God loved Zechariah and showed him the full extent of His love.

Zechariah wanted the Altar. But he also got the Angel.

Actually, Ephesians 3:20 doesn't even say that "God is able to do above all we ask or imagine," it says "He is able to do abundantly above all we ask or imagine."

Zechariah got the abundant part this day.

And he got more. Because honestly, Ephesians 3:20 says, that "God is able to do exceedingly, immeasurably, abundantly above all we ask or imagine."

So along with the Altar, and the Angel, Zechariah got the Announcement.

"Zechariah," Gabriel said, "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son."

It was like an infomercial, "But wait! There's more!"

Gabriel didn't just say, "Your wife will bear you a son." He said, "Your wife will bear you a son named John, who will be great in the sight of the Lord, be filled with the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb and will go before the Messiah in the spirit and power of Elijah – who was the greatest prophet of the Old Testament."

In the old south, they have an expression. When someone heard something that astonished them, they would say, "Well shut my mouth."

Zechariah should have said that. Or better still, he should have just shut his mouth. But because when he opened it, he expressed doubt about this miracle. Because after all, it

was exceedingly, abundantly above all he could ask or imagine.

I wonder how many times we have doubted that we'll ever get exceedingly, abundantly above all we can ask or imagine? The angel shut his mouth. For nine months.

But the story that begins the story of Jesus is the story of an old man, and an old woman who thought they had lost out. Thought they were beyond hope, and beyond prayers.

It's the story of two people who loved God and had their dreams come true and at a stage in their lives when they could not take credit, but only give credit to God for His great gift.

This story teaches us so many great things about God, and so many great things about the people who worship Him.

The distinguishing mark of Zechariah and Elizabeth was according to Luke 1:6,

Luke 1:6 (NIV) - ⁶Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.

I love what the first part of 2 Chronicles 16:9 tells us,

2 Chronicles 16:9 (NIV) - ⁹For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. . ."

Zechariah and Elizabeth were wholeheartedly devoted, so at the perfect time, God showed Himself strong to them.

Every story in the Bible teaches us something about God and something about ourselves. This story of the Forerunner teaches at least six lessons that should encourage us.

First, this story teaches us that. . .

1. God has plans for the world.

How do I know that? Well, 400 years before this announcement, God spoke through a prophet named Malachi.

God said,

Malachi 3:1 (NIV) - “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.

God isn’t a spur-of-the-moment God. He has thought about what’s best for the world, and what’s best for you, and what’s best for me, and He’s woven His plans into the fabric of future history.

Ephesians 1:4–6 (NIV): For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

And then we know according to Revelation 3 that Christ was slain before the foundation of the world.

God has planned out everything in advance. . .So. . .

Galatians 6:9 (NIV) - ⁹Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Galatians 6:9 (AMP) - 9 And let us not lose heart and grow weary and faint in acting nobly and doing right, for in due time and at the appointed season we shall reap, if we do not loosen and relax our courage and faint.
The second thing this story teaches me is that...

2. Every person has a purpose.

Before John was even conceived, God called out his purpose:

Listen again to Luke 1:17

Luke 1:17 (NIV) - ¹⁷And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

John’s purpose was to make people ready for the Lord. I might add that’s your purpose as well.

This passage not only teaches that every person has a purpose.

Psalms 139:13–18 (NIV): For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. 14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. 15 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. 16 Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. 17 How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum

of them! 18 Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand— when I awake, I am still with you.

That means that even parents are given a purpose in raising their children. Number 3. . .

3. God prepares parents to fulfill His purposes.

Do you think it was a coincidence that it took so long for Zechariah and Elizabeth to conceive?

God was preparing them for this incredibly special baby – like He prepares all parents for their very special children.

John was Jesus' older cousin. His job was to prepare the way for Jesus. But he couldn't prepare the way too soon, or the excitement might wear off. So, John had to be born just a few months before Jesus. And the world had to be ready before Jesus was born.

So, God waited. And that meant, Zechariah and Elizabeth waited. And while they waited, they matured. John was announced and born, at just the right time for him... for his parents to raise him to be the most important prophet in Biblical history.

4th, this story shows me that...

4. God makes promises.

Listen to this:

Malachi 4:5–6 (NIV) - ⁵“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”

These are the very last words of the OT. God then goes silent for 400 years. Does He forget His promise during that silence? Absolutely not.

The angel's announcement to Zechariah uses the very same words, 400 years later.

So, God makes promises. And even more encouraging...

5. God keeps promises.

What does the angel say about John the Forerunner? He says..

Luke 1:16–17 (NIV) - ¹⁶He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

This book [the Bible] is filled with promises from God, to you and me. He has kept, and the good news is that He will keep... every one of them.

2 Corinthians 1:20 (NIV) - ²⁰For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God.

2 Corinthians 1:20 (The Message) - ^{20–22} Whatever God has promised gets stamped with the Yes of Jesus. In him, this is what we preach and pray, the great Amen, God's Yes and our Yes together, gloriously evident.

According to Everet R. Storms, a Canadian schoolteacher who during his 27th reading of the Bible which took a year and a half Storms compiled several lists, which included promises by God to man (7,487), one man to another (991),

God the Father to God the Son (2), man to God (290) and several other combinations, including nine made to Satan.

One of those that fits in so well with the message today we find in Genesis chapter 3. . .

Genesis 3:15 (NIV) - ¹⁵And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

This was a promise of the one to come. The one that John was preparing the way for. Christ the Lamb of God.

In all, Storms tallied 8,810 promises.

And the 6th thing this passage teaches us is that...

6. God answers prayers.

Luke 1:13 (NIV) - ¹³But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.

How long do you suppose Zechariah had been praying for a son?

Don't give up on your dreams. – If they're good dreams, they're God dreams. – And God will either answer them or exceed them. He may answer them in a way you never imagined.

This is the story of a man whose prayers were answered exceedingly, abundantly, above all he asked or imagined.

What would you do if that happened to you? God is so good that it's not all that unusual for Him to do that very thing.

Peter got more than he asked or imagined.

- Like every first century boy, Peter wanted to be a rabbi. One day, Jesus chooses him to be His disciple, and Peter becomes one of the most famous rabbis of all time. And was told upon this rock I will build my church

Paul got more than he imagined.

- He had an experience that took him from killing off the church to writing encouragement to the church because of an encounter on a Damascus road.
- Paul wrote more books of the Bible than any other author, which makes him the greatest-selling author of all times.

Moses got more than he imagined. He wanted to free his people from slavery.

- He not only freed them, he led them to their own land and property. And established their law and culture for all time.

Abraham got more than he imagined. He wanted to have a son.

- He wound up becoming the father of nations.

Ruth got more than she imagined. She wanted a son.

- She wound up becoming the great-great-great-great-great-great grandmother of the Messiah.

You can have more than you've imagined.

You want a good life?

- God can help you with that.

- He wants to be with you and in you
- He desires to make your life better than you could ever make it on your own.

Jesus called this kind of life, “abundant life.”

And when people like us get more than they expected out of life... they raise their expectations.

Church, how many of you can remember the moment when you invited Jesus into your life, to forgive your sins and be your Lord and Savior?

If you have done that, your life has become more than you could have ever asked or imagined.

What would your life be like right now if you didn't have Jesus leading it?

It's easy for us to forget the kind of people we were or would be if. . .

Truth is it is the nature of us to want more than we already have which will make us take for granted what we've had for a while.

Which is why it's good to thank God every morning for your salvation.

Don't take it for granted.

Don't take His guidance for granted.

Don't take His love for granted.

Don't take His forgiveness for granted.

Don't take heaven for granted.

A good practice would be start thanking God every morning for your salvation.

We need to remember to be grateful, wake up in the morning and even before your first cup of coffee say,

Lord Jesus, thank you for saving me.

Thank you for loving me.

Thank you for forgiving me.

Thank you for giving me spiritual gifts to serve you with.

Thank you for sending me your Holy Spirit.

Thank you Lord!

Thank you Lord!

Thank you Lord!

You can ask Him for more, and Paul encourages us to do so...

1 Corinthians 14:1 (NIV) - Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.

But don't forget that if you have received His salvation you have received exceedingly, abundantly more than you ever asked or imagined.

When Zechariah got more than he imagined, you know what he did?

He thought about it every day for the next nine months.

God gave him the gift of silence for the next nine months (or maybe his wife) either way he could think about God's great gift to him.

He also obeyed God and did exactly what he was told: He named the boy "John."

We'll also see that he taught the boy Scripture. And he taught him his God-given purpose. He taught him to love the

Lord. And he taught him humility. (Those are great things to teach your children.)

What we can learn from Zechariah is that any day can become your best day. You just never know what God has in store for you.

So, expect great things from God and attempt great things for God. And see God show up and stand out.

Prayer