

Elizabeth

HER NAME MEANS

"God Is My Oath"

HER CHARACTER: A descendant of Aaron, Elizabeth was a woman the Bible calls "upright in the sight of God." Like few others, male or female, she is praised for observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations without blame. She is the first to acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

HER SORROW: To be barren for most of her life.

HER JOY: To give birth to John, later known as John the Baptist, the Messiah's forerunner. His name, divinely assigned, means, "The Lord Is Gracious."

KEY SCRIPTURE: Luke 1:5–80

Monday

HER STORY

*H*er eyes were a golden brown. Like currants set in pastry, they winked out at the world from cheeks that had baked too long in the sun. Snowy strands of hair straggled from beneath a woolen shawl, tickling her wrinkled face. Small hands rested tenderly on her rounded belly, softly probing for any hint of movement. But all was still. From her vantage point on the roof of the house, she noticed a figure walking up the pathway and wondered who her visitor might be.

She and Zechariah had been content enough in their quiet house these last few months, secluded in their joy. Each morning she had

opened her eyes as though waking to a fantastic dream. Sometimes she shook with laughter as she thought about how God had rearranged her life, planting a child in her shriveled-up, old-woman's womb.

Six months ago, Zechariah had been chosen by lot to burn incense before the Most Holy Place, a once-in-a-lifetime privilege. But during his week of priestly service in the temple, he had been frightened half to death by a figure who appeared suddenly next to the altar of incense. "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son," the angel told him, "and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord." It was Sarah and Abraham all over, Rebekah and Isaac, Rachel and Jacob. God was once again kindling a fire with two dry sticks.

For the life of her, Elizabeth couldn't understand her husband's response to the messenger that had so terrified him. Once you'd laid eyes on an angel, how could you fail to believe that anything was possible? But Zechariah had blurted out his skepticism and suffered the consequences. His voice had been snatched away and would not be given back until the angel's words came to pass. These days he communicated by scribbling on a wax tablet.

Elizabeth looked down again at the figure advancing up the path, a green sprig of a girl. The older woman stepped carefully down the stairs and into the house to welcome her guest. But with the young woman's words of greeting came something that felt like a gale force wind, shaking the beams and rafters of the house. Steadying herself, the older woman felt suddenly invigorated. Her unborn baby leapt inside her as she shouted out a welcoming response: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

Mary had made the journey all the way from Nazareth to visit her relative Elizabeth. The same angel who had spoken to Zechariah in the temple had whispered the secret of the older woman's pregnancy to the virgin, who was also with child. The magnificent song of praise that burst from Mary's lips during their meeting may have

taken shape during the course of her sixty-mile journey south, to the hill country of Judea where Elizabeth lived:

My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost
thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers.

Luke 1:46–55

The two women held each other, their bonds of kinship now stronger than what mere flesh and blood could forge. For Israel's God—the God of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Miriam, Deborah, Naomi, Ruth, Abigail, and Hannah—was on the move again, bringing the long-ago promise to fulfillment. And blessed was she who did not doubt that what the Lord had said to her would be accomplished.

INCENSE

Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, had been given a special, serious privilege. When it was his priestly division's turn to serve in the temple, he was chosen by lot—which was God's way of making the choice—to burn incense in the temple. Each morning and evening he took fire from the altar of burnt offering and placed it on the golden altar of incense that stood before the curtain separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. He then poured the dusty incense from a golden urn onto the fire. While Zechariah performed this duty, all the worshipers who were at the temple that day stood outside and prayed. The smoke and aroma of the incense symbolized their prayers rising up to God. The fragrance also served to fumigate air tainted with the odor of the blood of animals killed for the sacrifices.

The earliest historical records about worship include information on the burning of incense. All the nations surrounding Palestine appreciated the sweet smell of incense permeating not only their places of worship but also their homes. The incense Zechariah burned in the temple was made according to a special "recipe" (Exodus 30:34–38) of spices and salt that had been ground to a powder. This holy incense could be used only in the temple in worship, never for ordinary, everyday purposes.

The prophet Jeremiah often condemned the Israelites for burning incense to false gods. But he could be even more scathing in his denunciation when they burned incense when their hearts weren't in their worship (Jeremiah 6:20). God made it clear that the mere burning of incense didn't please him; it was only a symbol. He was looking for hearts that were turned toward him with faithfulness and trust.

Isn't that application obvious for us today as well? In all our forms of worship—our hymns and praise songs, our liturgies and dramas and readings—what is important to God is our hearts. Are they turned toward him in faithfulness and trust?

HER LEGACY IN SCRIPTURE

Read Luke 1:5–25, 39–45.

1. What do you learn about Elizabeth and Zechariah from Luke 1:5–7? Does Luke 1:6 imply that they were perfect? If not, what do these words mean?
2. Imagine an angel coming to you with some unexpected and unbelievable announcement. How do you think you would react?
3. When Elizabeth saw Mary, she was filled with the Holy Spirit and loudly exclaimed a blessing (Luke 1:42–44). Have you ever been moved to praise God like that? If so, when? If not, what would have to happen to move you to do that?
4. Elizabeth was going to be the mother of a prophet, yet she praised God for what he was doing in *Mary's* life. What does this say about Elizabeth?
5. Reread Luke 1:45. What does the Lord want you to believe?

HER PROMISE

God always keeps his promises! For hundreds of years, God had been telling the people of Israel that he would send a Messiah. One who would provide a direct bridge to God himself. One whose sacrifice would provide redemption for all time. The events in this first chapter of Luke are just the beginning of the fulfillment of God's greatest promise to his people. With Mary we can say: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!"

Promises in Scripture

But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.

—MALACHI 4:2

John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

—JOHN 1:29

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

—1 TIMOTHY 1:15

HER LEGACY OF PRAYER

Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!

—LUKE 1:45

- REFLECT ON: Luke 1:5–80.
- PRAISE GOD: That he is the Creator who shapes every child in the womb.
- OFFER THANKS: For the gift of children.
- CONFESS: Any tendency to cheapen the value of human life, including unborn life.
- ASK GOD: To restore our appreciation for the miracle of human life.

Lift Your Heart



person's a person, no matter how small!

—FROM *Horton Hears a Who* BY DR. SEUSS

Mary's visit to Elizabeth probably occurred when Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy. The younger woman may have stayed long enough to help the older one with her delivery. In any case, Mary would have been in the first trimester of her pregnancy and Elizabeth in her third. Here's what would have been happening to the children growing in their wombs:

Jesus:

- 18 days—his nervous system appeared.
- 4 weeks—his heart began beating.
- 30 days—most of his major organ systems had begun to form.
- 7 weeks—his facial features would have been visible.
- 8th week—all his major body structures and organs were present.
- 10th week—tiny teeth were forming in his gums.

12th week—his brain was fully formed and he could feel pain.
He may have even sucked his thumb.

John:

6th month—he could grasp his hands, kick, do somersaults, and
hear voices and sounds outside the womb.

Take a few moments to praise your Creator with the beautiful
words of Psalm 139:13–16:

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.

*Dear God, you are the Lord and Giver of life. Help me to respect,
protect, and nurture it no matter what color, no matter what age, no
matter what gender of human being I encounter. I ask this in the
name of Jesus, the bread and water of life. Amen.*