

THE FORERUNNER OF JESUS



Passages to Study: Luke 1:5-25, 57-80, Matt. 14:3-12.

Read with the class: Luke 1:7, 13, 17, 24-25, 57-60; 3:2-4, 15-23, Matt.14:3-12.

Texts for memorization:

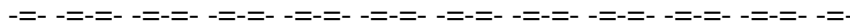
Younger: John 1:23.

Older John 1:23.



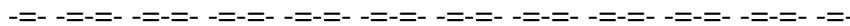
OBJECTIVES: To show:

1. The character of Zacharias and Elisabeth who, despite having no child, remained firm in their faith.
2. How Zacharias burst forth in praise as soon as he recovered his speech.
3. The privilege that was John's when he baptized Jesus.
4. John's faithfulness to God when he had to preach before Herod.
5. The high cost paid by John for his faithfulness to God in declaring His righteousness.



Note: In this lesson there are a few "time gaps" in the story of John the Baptist. This is in order to reach the point where he is presented as the herald who announces the arrival of the Lamb of God.

We cover the announcement of his birth, the occasion when he is named, his public ministry and finally Herod requesting his death. This covers a period of approximately thirty years. Mary's visit to Elisabeth is not referred to in this lesson, since it was dealt with in a previous one.



SCENE No. 1. In the temple.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE LESSON:

- Centuries have passed since God spoke to His people through Malachi, the last of the prophets. Now He speaks again.

- A system of courses, or turns, had been arranged among the priests that served in the temple.
- It was Zacharias' "lot" to be responsible for serving at the altar of incense.
- The sovereign will of God is seen in the timing of Zacharias' turn.

Cns. There are events in life which are the result of someone's decision but which God uses to carry out His will.

- Zacharias' task was to bring lighted coals from the bronze altar of sacrifice into the Holy Place and to put them on the golden altar of incense.
- The priest was to sprinkle incense over the coals as stipulated in the law of Moses.

Cmt. It was unlikely that Zacharias would have this opportunity more than a few times in his priestly service, for there were many others who would take their turn also.

- A priest acted alone in this work, without a helper and out of sight of the public.
- Only Zacharias was present when the angel Gabriel appeared.
- Gabriel tells Zacharias he has been sent from God, words which would inspire reverence, confidence, and godly fear in the priest.

- This same archangel was the one sent later to reveal to Mary she had been chosen as the channel through which the Saviour was to born.

- Zacharias is filled with fear as his prayers over the years are about to change from words spoken and desires expressed into becoming the father of one whose work would affect many lives.

Apl. No father knows what will become of his children, but true Christian parents teach them to serve God.

Cns. In a secondary sense, Sunday School teachers also have the same purpose, that of teaching the children to know God and to serve Him.

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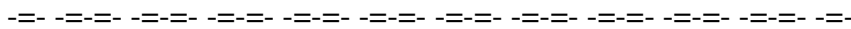
- One of Zacharias' prayers had been for a son. Now it is being granted by God. Although this had been his petition, it seems that Zacharias is unable to believe the angel's message.
- Despite their advancing age, Zacharias and his wife had continued to pray. v.13 "thy prayer is heard".
- Zacharias might have been around 50 years of age. The priests could not serve beyond this age.
- Elisabeth, who was advanced in years, had passed the age when she could be expected to conceive.
- Both husband and wife have the testimony of being righteous before God and blameless.

Cns. It is well for a teacher to emphasize the moral calibre of this couple as a means of forming in the minds of the children the goal of finding a like-minded spouse when they marry.

- Although both were faithful to God, they did not have everything in life that they wanted.

Apl. God has His purposes in giving and in withholding.

- Since God was giving a special message, he chose a special place to deliver it. The altar of incense represented a place of prayer and of fellowship with God.



SCENE No. 2. Zacharias and Elisabeth's home.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE LESSON:

- No specific details are given about the birth of this baby, but his conception, gestation and delivery were normal and similar to any other birth. The birth of the Lord Jesus was different.
- In the circumcision ceremony on the eighth day, a name is given to the newborn child.
- There are events which seem to be quite ordinary and unimportant, such as the matter of naming a child, yet have a certain significance which only time reveals.
- When Zacharias wrote, "His name is John", it is evident he not only BELIEVES but also OBEYS the word of God.

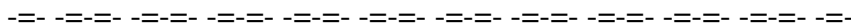
Apl. At a time like this, the will of God could have been overlooked. Strength of character was required to fulfill it.

- At the beginning, Zacharias became dumb because of unbelief; now he recovers his speech upon obeying.
- The first thing he does once he can speak is to bless and praise God lovingly.

Cns. Ask the children what things they would have said had they, like Zacharias, just recovered their speech?

- God is thanked and blessed despite the 9 months of silence, and there is no complaint made.

Apl. A person who cannot speak cannot testify for God. The sinner is like a person who cannot speak. He has no verbal praise to give God.



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SCENE No. 3. At the River Jordan.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE LESSON:

- Not much is known about John except that it is evident that from the outset he lived in fellowship with God.
- At some point upon reaching an age of maturity, John lived in a desert, that is an unpopulated area.
- Some believe John had contact with the group known as the Escenes, people regarded as responsible for preparing and storing the famous "Dead Sea Scrolls".
- In Israel remains of an Escene community can be found in a place called Qumram, near the caves where the scrolls were found.

Sug. If you can find a picture of this area, near the Dead Sea, it would be of interest to the students to see what the desert is like where John the Baptist lived.

- When the time arrived for John to begin his ministry, he went out preaching a concise message about the coming of the Messiah.
- He preached repentance to prepare the people for the appearing of the Messiah.

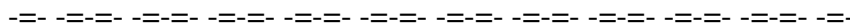
Apl. The same preparation is needed today in view of the coming of the Lord Jesus. One must Repent, Believe, and Obey.

- Baptism was a sign of repentance. It was a visible sign which carried a message to those who observed.

Cns. In Christian baptism as practiced today, the value of the symbolic act is in the testimony given to the onlooker. Repentance, faith, humility and acceptance of the truth have already taken place in the heart.

- It would seem that John and Jesus had no contact with each other. They lived in different parts of the country.
- Despite the lack of personal contact, John recognized the perfection of Christ for he did not want to baptize Him. He felt the need of being baptized by Jesus.
- John knew that his mission was that of preparing the way for the ministry of the Messiah.
- John's disciples would become disciples of the Lord Jesus.
- John did not come to speak of himself, and although he was well accepted by the people, he always pointed out that One greater than himself was coming. John was a true spokesman for Christ.
- The noble character of this man stands out in John's gospel, chapter 3, towards the end of his life. See verses 25-36.

- When told that more people were going to Jesus than to him for baptism, John recognized himself as the forerunner, replying: "He must increase, but I must decrease". (vs.30).



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SCENE No. 4. Herod's birthday feast.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE LESSON:

- The following points could be mentioned:
- The **FAITHFULNESS** of John as a servant of God. He did not change his message in any way to accommodate blatant sin in Herod's life.
- The **SUFFERING** of the servant. He was unjustly imprisoned and suffered for speaking the truth.
- The **DEATH** of the faithful servant, who had to pay with his life for a promise made by an immoral king, dominated by his carnal passions.

Cns. We know of few martyrs for the faith in these days that we know about. If the teacher knows about a case, it would be well to mention it to the class.

- Herod's sin shows up in several ways:

1. His evil desires and passions, seen in the presence of his friends.
2. His insensitivity and irresponsibility before a Holy God.
3. Herod allowed himself to be manipulated by an angry woman who did not really belong to him as wife.

- John had no fear of Herod and told him the truth.

Cmt. It is hoped that all teachers will be equally truthful and say whatever is necessary to instruct their students regarding their responsibility before a Holy God.

- We should not fear the powerful of this world when it comes to speaking God's truth.
- Sin appeals to the lowest fleshly instincts that are in a person.
- Herod made a foolish promise and stubbornly did not want to break his word made before his friends.
- To keep his word, he did something even worse. He acceded to the murderous request of a woman.

Cns. What should he have done?

Cmt. From this point on, Herod would suffer the effects of a troubled conscience.

- Some time later, Herod wanted to see Jesus, a wish that was granted him in the last hours of the Lord's life, but the Lord Jesus "answered him nothing". Lu. 23:8-9.

Cns. Had Herod perhaps lost any opportunity for repentance?