

HOMILY FOR THE BIRTH OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST. June 24
(For Sunday 5/7/2020)

St. John, the Forerunner and Baptist of the Lord, is greatly honored in the Orthodox Church. The Lord Himself said, "*Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist*" (Matthew 11:11). The birth of the Forerunner, as the Lord also said, was foretold by the Prophets (see Matthew 11:10). St. Luke gives a detailed account in his Gospel of the miraculous circumstances surrounding St. John's birth (Luke 1: 5-25, 57-80). The Archangel Gabriel, six months before the Annunciation, appeared to Zacharias, a priest in the Temple of Jerusalem. While he was censuring, the Archangel appeared and said to him: "*Your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John*" (Luke 1:13). He regularly prayed to the Lord for a child, and God gave him a son, who is the greatest of all the Prophets. What was later written by St. Paul the Apostle is fulfilled: "*God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think*" (Ephesians 3:20).

God, as the All-Knowing and All-Powerful Father, listens carefully to our prayers. He knows much better than we do the real nature of our petitions, whether or not they will actually benefit us. He richly provides the good things we ask for, and each of us will have experienced this generosity from our Heavenly Father. If there is doubt about the universal wisdom of God, let us consider: If we ask God for something that we need and that will help, can He deny us? The Lord Himself promised: "*Ask, and it will be given to you; ...For everyone who asks, receives... What man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will he give him a stone? Or, if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father, who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him*" (Matthew 7:7-11). Some question this, because they prayed and nothing happened. "If God is so helpful, why does He not give me what I want? Is it because God is unable to do it?" We know that Our Heavenly Father is all love, and for our sake He sacrificed His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ. We also know that God is omnipotent, and as Jesus assures us again, "*with God all things are possible*" (Matthew 19:26).

If we do not get something that we ask for in our prayers, we should look to ourselves, rather than blame God. St. James the *Adelfotheos* ("Brother of God") writes in his Epistle: "*You ask God and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your (no good) pleasures*" (James 4:3). It may also be our own lack of faith that leaves prayers unanswered. The Lord specifically said that "*Whatever things you ask in prayer, **believing** (in faith), you will receive*" (Matthew 21:22). Let us recall what happened to the Disciples of the Lord in the case of the epileptic child. The child's father came to them and asked for their help, but they were unable to cure him because their own faith was shaken. Later on, after the Lord healed the boy, His Disciples came to Him and asked, "*Why could we not cast it out? Jesus said to them, Because of your unbelief*" (Matthew 17:19-20).

Something else to consider is that when God answered the prayers of Sts. Zacharias and Elizabeth, many years had passed. Since it had been so long, they could maybe start to think that God had forgotten them. But God has His own plan, and when the time came, He sent His Archangel to deliver the good news to them. We can be sure that although God may not answer our prayers right away, He never forgets us! The way in which God treated Zacharias' doubt is also important. When he was told that he and his wife were going to have a son, he immediately questioned it, citing their age. God tolerated this human weakness, and to help him understand the truth of what he was told, the Archangel said to Zacharias: From now on "*you will be mute and not*

able to speak until the day these things take place." (Luke 1:20). And it happened! Of course, it was a great struggle during those nine months to not be able to utter a single word, but it was for his own good. The great joy of having a child more than made up for the loss of his voice. Zacharias learned a valuable lesson from God, and he repented of his lack of faith. God loves us, guides us, and cares for our spiritual welfare.

Finally, when the baby was born and Zacharias gave him the name John (in fulfillment of the words of the Archangel Gabriel), *"his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God"* (Luke 1:64). He was overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit and prophesied, announcing to all the work that St. John was to do by the command of God, as the Prophet and Forerunner of the Messiah (see Luke 1:68-79).

My dear brothers and sisters, may we keep in our minds and hearts these truths, which come from the Birth of the Righteous Forerunner: If we pray in faith, and those prayers are pure, God will answer, and in ways we cannot imagine. Sometimes God has His reasons for being slow in giving us what we pray for, but if we follow the patient example of Sts. Zecharias and Elizabeth, we will receive it when the time is right. And if we face some trials, as Zacharias did with his silence, then we should remember that this is not a punishment from God, but an opportunity to grow in the spiritual life. In honoring St. John, the Forerunner and Baptist of the Lord, let us ask him to intercede for us with our Lord and God, so that our prayers may be answered.