



VOL.
1



PREPARING THE WAY

LUKE 1:1-3:38

BY AL JOHNSON

Preparing the Way: Luke 1:1–3:38

Volume 1

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**PREPARING
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LUKE 1:1-3:38

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SERIES PREFACE

During my sophomore year of high school, God graciously opened my eyes to the beauty, authority, and life-giving power of His Word. For the first time, the Scriptures came alive to me. What had once seemed as nothing more than words on a page became the very voice of God, speaking to and transforming my heart. From that moment on, one desire has remained constant: to help people know Jesus Christ and walk faithfully in his ways.

Then, at age twenty-one, God began to call me into preaching ministry in a way I never expected. It was on a Sunday morning in Kenya, where I was serving as a missionary, when it was told to me that a local church across town had no one to preach that day. My heart stirred, and I had to go. With nothing but the short drive to the church to prepare myself, I simply opened my Bible and preached what I had been studying. I guess the sermon went well enough because I was asked to preach again that evening, this time outdoors in the slums during an evangelistic outreach. Then again the next day. Before long, I found myself preaching on average once a week for the next six months.

Looking back, I can see that those seemingly unplanned moments were what The Lord used them to confirm a calling that would shape the course of my life. Standing under the East African sky with little preparation and no polished manuscript, I discovered that God's Word is sufficient and that his Spirit is faithful to empower its proclamation. It was there that I sensed the Lord calling me to devote my life to preaching the Scriptures and to return home to do so among my own countrymen.

By God's grace, I have now been preaching the Bible in various contexts for nearly two decades. I currently serve as the Lead Pastor of The Well Community Church in San Antonio, where I have the great honor of preaching each week.

Over the years, my study habits have become more disciplined and comprehensive, producing far more material than can

ever fit into a single sermon. This commentary, like the ones I've written before it, was born out of that overflow.

What started as an idea to make simple study guides for the members of our church has grown into a desire to provide faithful verse-by-verse companions to the books of the Bible for anyone seeking to know the Word of God more deeply. They are not intended to replace careful Bible reading, but to encourage it.

This commentary on Luke is volume one of a seven-volume series, each volume examining Luke's Gospel section-by-section, and each section accompanying a weekly sermon at our church. My hope is that these commentaries will serve as companions to careful Bible reading, helping believers slow down, think deeply, and behold the glory of Christ in every passage.

Every time I sit down to write a chapter, I begin with a simple prayer: "Lord, help me be faithful to your Word and helpful to your people." If you are reading these pages, then in a very real sense, I have prayed for you. Much like Luke wrote his Gospel to his friend Theophilus, so that he "may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (Lk. 1:4), my desire is that God would use these studies to strengthen your faith and deepen your confidence in Jesus Christ.

My aim is to faithfully explain what the biblical text says while also shepherding the heart of the reader. I want every chapter to press the truth of God's Word into the everyday lives of ordinary Christians. Theology should never remain in the realm of ideas alone; it should shape our worship, deepen our repentance, strengthen our faith, and transform the way we live. If, by God's grace, these pages help you know Christ more fully, love him more deeply, and follow him more faithfully, then they will have accomplished their purpose.

Though these studies were originally written with the people of The Well Community Church in mind, I have sought to write in a way that serves the broader church as well. I have intentionally kept the writing pastoral, practical, and accessible without sacrificing theological depth. Throughout the commentary, I also interact with trusted voices from

church history and modern scholarship—not to overwhelm you with academic discussion, but to demonstrate that faithful Christians have carefully wrestled with these texts for centuries.

May you find that walking daily with Jesus is not only essential, but the greatest joy and privilege this life has to offer.

— Pastor Al Johnson
San Antonio, Texas
June 2026

CHAPTER 1

LUKE 1:1-4

Luke's Prologue

Luke sets out to assemble **“an orderly account”** concerning the life, ministry, and atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ for his friend **“Theophilus”** (v.3). Already from his preamble, Luke makes it crystal-clear that what is compiled in his book are real events involving real people with real witnesses who can attest to them. When we read Luke, we must understand that this Gospel is not an embellished legend, but that it claims to be true, accurate history. Christian faith is rooted in historical fact, and we must never forget this. “The first preachers did not go up and down the world, proclaiming an elaborate, artificial system of abstruse doctrines and deep principles. They made it their first business to tell men great plain facts” (Ryle 2012, 1).

The Bible is not speculative literature, but divine revelation from God that is corroborated by human history. There will always be critics who dispute it, but their efforts to cast doubt on the accuracy of the biblical writers always seem to fall terribly short. One atheist historian, William Mitchell Ramsay, sought to do such a thing in the early part of the twentieth century. Rather than disproving anything, “Dr. Ramsay was converted to Christianity along the way, because he discovered that every time a spade of dirt was turned over in those days [*of his research*], some historical aspect of the Gospels was verified and authenticated. Ramsay and other secular historians have said that Luke, apart from inspiration, apart from divine assistance that he enjoyed, was the most accurate historian in the entire ancient world” (Sproul 2020, 4 italics mine).

Luke had no predisposition to believe in Jesus as Messiah. Before he was a gospel author and traveling companion of the Apostle Paul, Luke was a doctor of medicine, and he was from a Gentile background. In Paul's letter to the Colossians, he refers to Luke as “the beloved physician” (Col. 4:14) Doctors have always dealt in realities that can be observed, analyzed, and tested, even in the first century. As in the modern day, they were formally trained in forensic skills to methodically gather data,

examine claims and weigh evidence to support their conclusions. A good doctor would be naturally skeptical of superstition and the miraculous.

And Luke was a good doctor. All the skills he had honed through his training – his attention to detail, his studiousness, his inquisitiveness – were put to use in order to thoroughly investigate the claims being made about Jesus Christ.

Luke is unique among the Gospel writers in that he authored both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, both addressed to Theophilus. In doing so, Luke gives the church a two-volume account of the life of Christ and his continued work through his apostles after his resurrection and ascension. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Luke records not only what Jesus did and taught during his earthly ministry, but also how the risen Christ continued to build his church through the power of the Spirit. Together, Luke and Acts form one continuous testimony to the saving work and kingdom reign of Jesus Christ.

Luke appears to be writing roughly thirty years after the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. This matters greatly, because it places the time of authorship well within the lifetimes of eyewitnesses who could be interviewed by Luke to confirm or deny claims about Jesus and the things he said. Paul himself writes in 1 Corinthians 15:6 that more than five hundred people saw the risen Christ at one time, many of whom were still living when Paul wrote those words. This is why the opening verses of Luke's Gospel are so important: the most significant event in human history, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, was not done secretly or hidden in some obscure corner of the Roman Empire; it was public, attested to by living, ordinary people, who were willing to testify to the truth and power of what they had witnessed even on pain of death.

Luke tells us that his purpose for writing is that the reader **“may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught”** (v. 4). Luke wants us to possess confidence, assurance, and clarity concerning Jesus Christ. As we walk through Luke's Gospel, he wants us to know the things we will read about really happened and are not myths. So when Luke writes in verse 1 concerning **“the things that have been accomplished among us”** (v. 1), he is speaking about real events that he has carefully investigated: Did a virgin truly conceive a child? Did Jesus truly walk

on water? Did he really feed the five thousand? Were demons actually cast out? Did miracles truly occur? Was there truly a crucifixion under Pontius Pilate? Did Jesus Christ actually rise bodily from the grave? Luke is essentially saying, “I set out to determine exactly what happened.” The Gospel before us is the documented result of that investigation.

Scholars consistently point to the sophistication of Luke’s Greek writing, his historical precision, and the disciplined nature of his research. Part of Luke’s research involved investigating oral tradition, the accounts people were repeating and proclaiming throughout the churches and communities. He would have interviewed eyewitnesses, sat with them personally, listened carefully to their testimonies, compared details, and weighed those accounts alongside any other evidence he uncovered. Luke also examined the written documents that were already circulating by that time. He acknowledges in the opening verses that **“many have undertaken to compile a narrative”** (v. 1). By this point, Matthew and Mark were likely already written and circulating among believers. Paul himself had already been writing letters to churches throughout the Roman world, and Luke had traveled extensively alongside him, personally witnessing the power of the Gospel advancing across nations.

The reader should find great comfort and confidence when approaching Luke’s Gospel because it would have been foolish for Luke to fabricate or exaggerate these claims. He was writing within living memory of the events, while eyewitnesses were still alive, under the scrutiny of educated readers and influential Roman officials who could have wanted to expose inaccuracies. Luke had nothing to gain from inventing myths and everything to lose by attaching himself publicly to the crucified and risen Christ.

MOST EXCELLENT THEOPHILUS

It is also important to recognize that Luke’s work was not being written without accountability. He writes to **“most excellent Theophilus”** (v3), which would have been a title given to a person of noble position and the ancient Roman world. The same language appears throughout Acts when referring to Roman governors and political leaders. In Acts 23:26, Claudius Lysias addresses Governor Felix as “his Excellency.” In Acts 24:2, Felix is again addressed with formal honor, and in Acts 26:25,

Paul uses similar language before Governor Festus. The title points to a man of influence, education, status, and likely governmental authority.

Theophilus himself was almost certainly wealthy and highly educated. He was also likely a Gentile, just like Luke. His very name points in that direction. “Theo” is not a Jewish name rooted in Hebrew tradition, but a Greek name flowing out of the Gentile world. Luke, a Gentile writing to another Gentile, is recording the life of the Jewish Messiah who came not only for Israel, but for the nations. Already in the opening verses of Luke’s Gospel we see the global scope of God’s salvation beginning to emerge.

What exactly Theophilus believed remains uncertain. We don’t know if this man Theophilus was a Christian who desired greater clarity around the claims of Christianity, or if he was a non-believing friend of Luke, whom he wished to persuade. Nonetheless, it would seem that such a massive research project would need equally massive funding, making Theophilus Luke’s likely benefactor. Here we find yet another reason to trust Luke, seeing that he would be accountable to a man connected to Roman governmental leadership.

There is also something beautiful in Theophilus’s very name. Theophilus means “lover of God” or “loved by God.” What is remarkable is that this name may have belonged to him long before he truly knew or loved God at all. And yet providentially, the Gospel arrives in his hands. Ambrose, the fourth-century church father, said it wonderfully: “So the Gospel was written to Theophilus, that is, to him whom God loves. If you love God, it was written to you” (“Ambrose of Milan on Luke 1:3 - Catena Bible & Commentaries” 2026).

That is exactly right. Luke’s Gospel was written for Theophilus, but it was never meant to stop with him. It is written for all who love God, all who desire to know Christ more deeply, and all who are searching for certainty concerning the truth. More than that, it is written in the hope that many who do not yet know God would become lovers of God through faith in Jesus Christ. In many ways, that is the great purpose of Luke’s Gospel itself: that we would love God, know His Son rightly, and make him known to the world.

Luke writes with the clear purpose that Theophilus would possess certainty concerning what he had heard. He wants his reader grounded in reality, convinced of the facts concerning Jesus Christ.

Throughout this study it will be important to remember that Luke writes as both a physician and a theologian, with the precision of a scholar and the faithfulness of a servant of Christ. This becomes especially important when we consider the backdrop of our world, our culture, and the spiritual warfare constantly surrounding the people of God. The Bible is indeed the Holy Scriptures, and they teach clearly that God is the Creator who rules and reigns over all things. Yet Scripture also reveals that there is a counterfeit king, our adversary Satan, who accuses the saints night and day. He seeks to discourage, distort, deceive, and plant seeds of disbelief within the hearts of men and women. Such is the need for writing that grounds believers in a world constantly attempting to distort truth and dissuade people from Christ. Some of you reading this right now are discouraged, confused, weary, doubting, and slowly losing hope. It is people like you whom Luke has in mind as he writes. He writes so that weary saints would be strengthened, doubting hearts steadied, and believers anchored once again in the certainty of who Jesus Christ is and what he has truly accomplished.

Through this Gospel, God gives his church an orderly, trustworthy, historically grounded account of the Savior of the world. In many ways, my heart as a pastor mirrors Luke's burden for Theophilus, that you too would have confidence, clarity, and certainty concerning Jesus Christ and the things you have been taught. I want to see a generation of believers firmly grounded in the true history and unshakable reality of who Jesus is and what he has accomplished.

QUESTIONS

What doubts or questions have challenged your faith in the past?

How does knowing Christianity rests on historical reality strengthen your confidence today?

What does Luke’s own investigation tell us about the credibility of Jesus, and why is that significant for skeptics and believers alike?

If Jesus truly is who Luke says he is, what areas of your life still need to come under his authority?

CHAPTER 2

LUKE 1:5-25

Birth of John The Baptist Foretold

Luke promised to give us an orderly account concerning the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Rather than starting directly with the birth of Jesus, Luke begins with John the Baptist and the events surrounding his birth. I have often pondered why this would serve as Luke's starting point. Of all the Gospel writers, Luke alone begins at this particular juncture, slowing down to carefully unfold the story surrounding John's arrival before bringing us fully into the birth of Jesus Christ himself.

Over time, I have found great comfort in Luke's decision for three reasons: (1) it connects the New Testament and Old Testament perfectly. The close of the Old Testament ends with the foretelling of John the Baptist's coming. The prophet Malachi writes, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes" (Mal. 4:5). Jesus himself later affirms that this prophecy was fulfilled in John the Baptist, the forerunner who came preparing the way for him (Matt. 11:13–14). Then comes the promise that through this coming messenger, God "will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers" (Mal. 4:6). Between the close of Malachi and the opening events of Luke's Gospel stands roughly four hundred years of silence. Luke's choice to start here reminds us that God's promises do not die in silence no matter how much time passes by. (2) By intentionally connecting his Gospel back to Malachi, Luke, a Gentile himself, testifies to the truthfulness, continuity, and fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. The God who spoke at the end of Malachi is the same God now moving again in Luke's Gospel.

At the appointed time, God was to speak again, and the first sign that the Messiah was coming was the arrival of a promised forerunner, John the Baptist. Yet Luke doesn't even begin his Gospel with the ministry of John the Baptist. Instead, he begins it some years before, with John's parents and the circumstances of his birth. This brings me to the final reason I've found a particular comfort in Luke's starting

place. (3) A barren woman and an aging priest who longed in his heart to become a father. I can't help but notice that the final promise of Malachi speaks about the turning of fathers toward their children, and the opening movement of Luke's Gospel introduces us to Zechariah, a man whose heart was deeply yearning for the child he and his wife, Elizabeth, had not yet conceived. We will spend some time looking at Elizabeth's desire for motherhood and the burden of barrenness soon, but we must not miss here Luke's emphasis on John the Baptist's father, telling us that the turning of hearts had already begun. I want us to see that even in the quiet longing of an elderly couple, God was preparing to fulfill promises spoken centuries earlier, in a myriad of ways.

THE DAYS OF HEROD

Luke gives us our bearings by identifying the historic time and place of these events in a way that is both verifiable and historical. The events surrounding the birth of John the Baptist and later, the Lord Jesus, take place, **“in the days of Herod, king of Judea”** (v. 5). These were days of deep darkness for God's people. The Herod referred to here is Herod I, better known as Herod the Great, the Roman-appointed king of Judea during this time.

Herod's father was Antipater, an Idumean (Edomite) official who rose to prominence through his close alliance with Rome and his support of Julius Caesar. Antipater gained significant favor and influence within the Roman Empire. Caesar eventually appointed him procurator (or governor) over Judea, to which he named his son Herod governor of Galilee, opening the door for Herod's rise to power. Herod was named king of Judea by Octavian and Anthony and confirmed by the Senate in 40 B.C. Herod waged war alongside the Romans to defend against the Parthian invasion of Palestine and established his kingdom, becoming undisputed ruler in 37 B.C. (MacArthur 2009, 22).

Herod's reign over Judea placed him as ruler over the Jews. Herod however, was not a legitimate heir to the throne of David, nor was he widely accepted by the Jewish people as a true Jewish king. Herod was ethnically Idumean, an Edomite. The Edomites were descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob (Gen. 25:19-34), and were a persistent enemy of the peoples and kingdoms of Israel throughout

the Old Testament. The conflict stretches all the way back to the womb itself, where the struggle between the two brothers began before they were even born. Though Esau was the older brother by natural birthright, God declared that the covenant promise would continue through Jacob, the chosen son through whom the nation of Israel and ultimately the promised Messiah would come.

In order to “ingratiate himself with the Jewish people, he married Mariamne, a member of the prestigious and wealthy Jewish Hasmonean family, which had ruled Israel during much of the intertestamental period” (MacArthur 2009, 22). He earned his title, “the Great,” by his many achievements and accomplishments, which truly were great. Herod was a master builder and was responsible for massive construction projects throughout the region he ruled. He rebuilt and expanded the temple in Jerusalem, an undertaking which was ongoing during Jesus’ life and ministry. Remnants of Herod’s architectural achievements still stand across Israel to this day.

Yet beneath the crown and achievements, Herod was a ruthless and paranoid man. History records that Herod murdered his own wife, several of his sons, and other relatives out of fear that someone might threaten his rule. Caesar Augustus himself reportedly joked that it was safer to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son. As mentioned earlier, Herod did not receive a throne through the covenant promise of God, but by the Roman crown. Herod’s loyalty was first and foremost to Rome and to Caesar, not to God, and certainly not to the Jews he governed. While the promised King would come from the line of Jacob according to the covenant faithfulness of God, Herod stood as a counterfeit king who hated the will of God and opposed his people, something seen clearly in Matthew’s Gospel when he sought to hunt down and kill Jesus after his birth (Matt. 2). This is the ruler sitting upon the throne when Luke opens his Gospel. Darkness covered the land through corrupt leadership, political oppression, spiritual deadness, and violent rebellion against God, yet into that darkness the true light was coming. As Isaiah prophesied centuries earlier, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isa. 9:2). Luke is setting the stage for us to witness the fulfillment of this promise, and all that follows.

ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH

Despite the shadows that hovered over God's people during the reign of Herod, in Judea there was Zechariah and Elizabeth, a righteous priest and his godly wife, **“walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord”** (v. 6). This does not mean that Zechariah and Elizabeth were sinless, but that they were characterized by their true, abiding faith in God and obedience to his commands. They clearly loved God, and that love shaped how they lived. As Jesus would later teach, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (Jn. 14:15). Obedience to God does not earn us righteous status before God, nor does it save us; obedience authenticates our faith and our affection toward God. Zechariah and Elizabeth walked faithfully before the Lord even during years of disappointment, for **“they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren”** (v. 7).

I've counseled many couples who have sat in the downtrodden seats of disappointment like Zechariah and Elizabeth. They are described in our text as a righteous, obedient, and godly couple. This is the hardest posture to maintain when years go by and prayers remain unanswered. Clearly, their righteousness did not earn them a place at the front of the line for God to answer their prayers. They were both **“advanced in years”** (v. 7), meaning they had long passed the normal years of childbearing. All the years of praying, longing, hoping, and waiting for a child had gone unanswered. In many ways, it must have felt as though God was silently ignoring them, much like he had appeared to silently ignore his people in the four hundred years leading up to these events. And yet they *remained faithful*. This is the drum I pray I continue to beat (and march to) until Christ returns or calls me home: remain faithful. In the good days and the bad days, in seasons of abundance and seasons of silence, remain faithful to Jesus. In every season, the Christian must ask, “What does faithfulness to Christ look like here and now?” It means examining the Scriptures, submitting to God's Word, will, and ways. It means staying near to Jesus and near to his people, remaining committed to what his written word has revealed.

Far too often we become consumed with visible results, measurable success, and immediate fruitfulness. Yet the calling of the Christian

is not firstly to fruitfulness, but faithfulness. Let the believer concern himself with faithfulness and let God concern himself with fruitfulness. Whether it is the fruitfulness of the womb, ministry, work, leadership, marriage, or any other longing of the human heart, our responsibility is to walk faithfully before God. The Lord alone governs the timing, measure, and outcome of fruitfulness. Zechariah and Elizabeth remind us that a life can appear barren for many years and still be deeply pleasing in the sight of God.

In many ways, Zechariah and Elizabeth embody the kind of faithful remnant God has always preserved for himself. Ordinary people who quietly continue walking with God while the world around them races further into darkness. They continued worshipping, obeying, serving, praying, and waiting upon the promises of God even when their circumstances seemed to suggest otherwise. Little did they know that they'd soon become part of one of the greatest moments in redemptive history.

GOD BREAKS THE SILENCE

It happened at the temple. Zechariah was **“serving as priest before God when his division was on duty”** when he was chosen to offer incense to the Lord (v. 8-9). Zechariah was simply being faithful in the place God had assigned him. He was **“chosen by lot”** (v. 9) to enter the temple and burn incense. To modern readers this may sound as random as rolling dice, yet throughout the Scriptures we repeatedly see the sovereignty of God governing even what appears to men as chance. Proverbs 16:33, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.” What appeared outwardly as routine priestly procedure was actually divine providence unfolding. Zechariah was not accidentally standing in that temple on that particular day. God had orchestrated the moment. After four hundred years of silence, God was about to speak again.

The offering of incense carries great significance throughout the Scriptures. Incense was closely connected with the prayers of God's people rising before him. “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you” (Ps. 141:2). Likewise, in Revelation 8:3-4, incense is pictured alongside “the prayers of all the saints” ascending before God. As

Zechariah entered the holy place to burn incense, Luke notes that **“the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense”** (v. 10). While the corporate prayer of God’s people is being brought into force here, so is God’s attention to the specific prayers of Zechariah and Elizabeth. This should be an encouragement to Christians everywhere. God hears your prayers— personally and specifically.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had apparently never stopped praying for a child. Though they were now advanced in years and long past natural childbearing age, their prayers had not been forgotten by God. When the angel Gabriel appears, he says, **“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard”** (v. 13). God was going to grant their request and give them a child.

May this be instructive here for weary believers. We don’t know if the prayer heard was the one Zechariah made at that very moment, or one made years, even decades, prior. It’s possible that, despite his age and his wife’s age and after so many years of waiting, Zechariah held onto his hope for a child and ceaselessly prayed to become a father. But it’s just as likely that he had ceased to wait, accepted his childlessness as a “no” from God, and moved on. Many prayers offered to God feel buried beneath years of silence. Some prayers seem unanswered for so long that people quietly stop expecting God to move at all. Yet Luke reminds us that God does not operate according to our timelines. God had not forgotten Zechariah and Elizabeth. Their prayers had been heard all along. And at the appointed time, while Zechariah faithfully exercised ordinary obedience in his duties to the temple, God intervened in extraordinary grace. And so the angel told him that he **“shall call his name John”** which means “God is gracious” (v. 13).

In this moment, God breaks the silence, and the first words announced are not only the answer to Zechariah and Elizabeth’s prayers, but the fulfillment of promises spoken centuries earlier. Yet this child would be far more than the long-awaited son of an elderly couple. John would be the promised forerunner sent to prepare the way for the Messiah, fulfilling what God had spoken through the prophet Malachi generations before: **“and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers**

to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (v. 17).

SIGNIFICANCE OF JOHN

“...Many will rejoice” (v.14) at the birth of John the Baptist. For his parents, he is the fulfillment of a lifetime of longing. For all who hoped in God and the prophets, John was the herald of the one who would come to save the world, Jesus Christ. Zechariah is told that John will be **“great before the Lord”** and that he **“must not drink wine or strong drink”** (v. 15). While many have suggested that this suggests John would take a Nazirite vow, I find myself in agreement with the late R.C. Sproul here. To quote Sproul, “Gabriel said John would not drink neither wine nor strong drink, not because he was going to be a Nazirite but because he was to have a special role as prophet, an ascetic prophet, one who would come out of the desert just like Elijah” (Sproul 2020, 11). Furthermore, it seems that if such a vow was to be undertaken and significant to the story of John the Baptist, it would have been duly noted by Luke. While John’s lifestyle would reflect the asceticism of the Nazirites, Gabriel only notes abstinence from strong drink, and does not mention any of the other stipulations of a Nazirite vow listed in Numbers 6.

Far more significant than the dietary details, Gabriel says that John will be **“filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb”** (v. 15). The barren woman is to be given a child, and before this child is even born he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit. Those who think that the womb is the sovereign domain of the mother ought to think again. “Her body, her choice” is an abominable distortion of the truth. God alone is the source of life, and he is the sole authority over it. The womb is God’s to grant life to or take life from; the choice has never been the woman’s. Any justification for the termination of a pregnancy ought to be exposed and condemned outright by Christians world-wide, as it is simply nothing less than murder. In our modern day, when such appalling evils are called good, we can easily see how much we still need ministry such as John the Baptist’s to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of all **“to the Lord their God”** (v.16). The primary purpose of John’s ministry was to sound the alarm and blast the trumpet for all to hear, making all who would listen ready to receive their savior and King.

GOD HAS THE LAST WORD

Zechariah struggles to believe Gabriel's message from God. Thinking in human terms, he questions how this could possibly happen for his wife whose childbearing years had long since passed. But that's just it; it wasn't possible in *human terms*. Gabriel, who **stands in the presence of God**, was sent to speak to Zechariah (v. 19). Clearly, what was taking place was supernatural. Yet Zechariah, the godly and righteous man, doubts God. This shows us even great, godly men can allow fear to override their faith, but it would be a mistake to take nothing from this passage but some comfort for our own lack of faith, or worse an excuse to falter in a similar way. Rather, we ought to learn from what Zechariah forgot in this moment: we ought to trust in God, and the truthfulness of his revealed word. God had already proven himself trustworthy to Zechariah by his word and by sending him an angel. God has already proven himself to us, too, and we can easily access all that he has revealed to us in the Bibles within reach on our bookshelves and at our fingertips through our smartphones.

As a consequence of his doubt and further proof of the veracity of the word he was given, Zechariah is struck **“silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time”** (v. 20). The God who had been silent for centuries now speaks, and when his servant responds with unbelief, he himself is made silent. What follows is not resignation, but faithful endurance by Zechariah. He returns from the temple unable to speak, but he does not abandon his post. He continues in his calling, carrying out his responsibilities as a priest, waiting, working, and worshiping even while carrying the consequence of his unbelief. In the same way Luke earlier described Zechariah and Elizabeth as walking blamelessly before God, here we see a man who continues to walk faithfully.

I believe that in God's providence, Zechariah's silence becomes a sign to those around him, a living testimony that God has indeed spoken and is now at work fulfilling his promise. And in time, the promise proves true. **“After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived”** (v. 24). Elizabeth remained hidden for a time, likely until she was clearly and

visibly showing the evidence of what God had done, at which point she celebrated openly and publicly, **“Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people”** (v. 25). The Lord has seen her, known her, and acted on her behalf. Her reproach, her shame before others, and her long years of barrenness and public disgrace are lifted by the gracious hand of God. God had never forgotten Elizabeth. May you, too, be reminded that God has not forsaken you, nor has he forgotten you. His eyes are, and have always been upon you, and his timing is always perfect. As he turned Elizabeth’s sorrow into joy, may you labor faithfully, trusting he has the power to do the same for you, knowing that God gets the last word.

QUESTIONS

Why was it important for Luke to begin his Gospel with John the Baptist instead of Jesus?

What does this passage teach us about being faithful in our ordinary work? What about waiting on God’s timing?

In what areas of your life are you tempted to believe God has forgotten you because of delayed answers?

What is Luke ultimately teaching us about the kind of God we serve through this opening narrative?

CHAPTER 3

LUKE 1:26-38

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

It was **“in the sixth month”** of Elizabeth’s pregnancy that **“the angel Gabriel”** was back at it again on another assignment. He **“was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth”** (v. 26). “Nazareth, a shoddy, corrupt halfway stop between the port cities of Tyre and Sidon, was overrun by Gentiles and Roman soldiers” (R Kent Hughes 2015, 31). It was here that Gabriel was to meet Mary, **“a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph”** (v. 27). Let’s examine the significance of the virgin birth, then take a look at the betrothal process.

VIRGIN BIRTH

Seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ, the prophet Isaiah foretold, “The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son” (Isa. 7:14). Throughout the Scriptures, a sign is oftentimes something supernatural God uses to get people’s attention and validate or point to a promise he’s made. The sign that the savior of the world had come would be the virgin birth, something so utterly extraordinary that it would be impossible to rationalize or explain away. If someone says that a virgin has conceived a child, the only two reasonable responses to such a claim are to either dismiss it outright because it’s ridiculous, or to watch and wait to see what else happens. And that’s what God was telling his people through this miracle: when the virgin conceives, you better pay attention; Messiah has come.

And Luke, the careful historian and physician, would have certainly gone to great lengths before he signed off on something so incredible with certainty. He would have known as well as anyone in the ancient world that virgins do not bear children; that is a preposterous contradiction of terms. But that’s precisely the point, and if an investigation into the claim was able to prove it true, then it would be an undeniable fact that God himself miraculously intervened.

The virgin birth is a foundational Christian belief. To deny the virgin birth would mean to say that God was lying when he spoke through his prophets. Now, to be fair to the critics, we can acknowledge that yes, this is a wildly impossible claim, but it is the claim of the Word of God, and so we must consider it seriously and carefully remembering that while with man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible (Matt. 19:26). Our confidence in Christ's miraculous birth is not blind acceptance, but faith that 1) God can do what he says he will do, and 2) the rest of Jesus' life gives us good reason to believe it really happened. Christians throughout all of history maintain that Mary was a virgin at conception and throughout her pregnancy, and we must continue to uphold this as the truth.

The virgin birth also reveals the uniqueness of Jesus from the very beginning. The second member of the Trinity humbled himself, took on flesh and blood, entered the world through the womb of a woman, and was born into humanity like the rest of us. Jesus does not merely identify as a man. His flesh and blood is not a mask worn over the face of Divinity, but is the real flesh and real blood of God. This is one of the great mysteries and glories of the Christian faith: Jesus Christ is truly God and truly man. Not half God and half man, but completely both at the same time.

This is why Isaiah declares that his name shall be called Immanuel, meaning "God with us" (Isa. 7:14, Matt. 1:23). That is the great promise of light breaking into the darkness of the world: God has come to us. Not merely sending another prophet, priest, or king, but coming himself to dwell among his people. The virgin birth announces that God himself has stepped into human history to accomplish what fallen humanity could never accomplish on its own. And Luke, after careful investigation, writes these things so that we would know with certainty that they are true.

"And the virgin's name was Mary" (v. 27). Mary was from a small, obscure town called Nazareth. And by small, I mean likely well under one thousand people. For comparison, there were fewer people in Mary's town than there are students in most of the high schools here in San Antonio. My own graduating class was likely larger than the entire population of Nazareth. If you have ever lived in or around a

small town, then you understand how quickly news travels and how strong social pressure can become. Everybody knows everybody, everybody knows your family, and gossip spreads fast. In a place like Nazareth, being a young virgin girl suddenly found pregnant would not go unnoticed. The public scrutiny, suspicion, whispers, and assumptions surrounding Mary would have been immense. This would have created tremendous conflict for the bride-to-be and her betrothed.

BETROTHAL

Mary and Joseph's betrothal was far different from what most people think of as modern engagement. In first-century Jewish culture, betrothal was a serious covenant commitment that was binding. Though the marriage had not yet been consummated, the couple was already considered bound to one another. This is why Matthew records that when Joseph discovered Mary was pregnant, he considered "divorcing her quietly" (Matt. 1:19). Ending a betrothal required an actual divorce because the covenant was already established, even though the wedding celebration and living together had not yet occurred. Courtship for Mary and Joseph was far different than the hookup and breakup culture that dominates much of our modern world. Relationships in their day were approached with seriousness, intentionality, family involvement, and with covenant in mind. Courtship was not built upon casual sex or cycling through one noncommittal relationship after another. The purpose was marriage, the binding of a man to a woman in an unbreakable covenant made before God Almighty.

The decision to be married was made before the betrothal ever took place. This is why betrothal itself was already a type of binding covenant commitment. It was not casual dating with an easy exit strategy if feelings changed. Once betrothed, the couple was pledged to one another, so much so that ending the relationship required divorce (Matt. 1:19). Mary and Joseph were already pledged to one another when Gabriel appeared. They were not two reckless teenagers eloping in cavalier romance. They were a young couple seriously preparing for covenant marriage, building a future together under the sight of God and within the accountability of their small community.

MARY

“Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” (v. 28). It is well known that Protestants and Catholics often enter into fiery debates regarding Mary. While I reject much of the Marian dogma developed within Roman Catholicism and parts of Eastern Orthodoxy, it is still worth noting that those traditions at least attempt to honor Mary in light of the extraordinary role God entrusted to her. At times, it almost seems as though many Protestants overcorrect in reaction to Mary’s unbiblical exaltation by refusing to properly acknowledge what Scripture itself clearly says about her.

We rightly speak of the godliness of Zechariah and Elizabeth. We honor the greatness of John the Baptist, whom Jesus himself says was the greatest born among women (Matt. 11:11). Yet what are we to do with the woman whom Scripture calls “favored” by God and “blessed... among women” (Lk. 1:28, 42)? Mary is not to be worshiped, prayed to, or elevated as a co-redeemer alongside Christ. She is a sinner saved, like all of us, by the grace and mercy that was to be bought with the blood shed by the very Son she carried in her womb. And yet, Scripture does present her as a uniquely blessed and godly young woman chosen by God for one of the greatest privileges ever entrusted to a human being. There is no virtue in diminishing what the Bible itself honors. “We must in fairness admit that no woman was ever so highly honored as the mother of our Lord. It is evident that one woman only out of the countless millions of the human race, could be the means whereby God could be ‘manifest in the flesh,’ and the Virgin Mary had the mighty privilege of being that one. By one woman, sin and death were brought into the world at the beginning. By the child-bearing of one woman, life and immortality were brought to light when Christ was born. No wonder that this one woman was called ‘highly favored’ and ‘blessed’” (Ryle 2012, 18).

As you could imagine, receiving a visitation from an angel could be terrifying. **Mary “was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be”** (v.29). The angel seeks to comfort Mary immediately: **“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God”** (v. 30). This is a divine act of grace. Mary had not done anything to earn it, yet she was to be a recipient of divine favor.

A young girl from a corrupt and obscure town is now standing face to face with a messenger sent from the presence of God. Mary is trying to process what she is hearing, what she is seeing, and why she, of all people, would receive such a greeting. She was not chosen because she was powerful, wealthy, famous, or morally superior to all others. She was chosen by grace. A grace that would even reach someone in as low a place as Nazareth. The initiative belongs entirely to God.

This is the pattern in which God's grace works throughout all of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. God delights in setting his favor upon unlikely people. He chooses the humble, the lowly, the overlooked, and the weak so that his glory alone is magnified. Mary herself will later sing, "he has looked on the humble estate of his servant" (Lk 1:48).

There is also great comfort here for all believers, not just Mary. God's grace does not arrive because we have earned his attention. His favor is not purchased through human effort or religious performance. Mary stands as a reminder that God moves toward people in grace long before they could ever deserve it. The same God who looked upon Mary in her humility is the God who sees, knows, and extends grace to his people today.

All that is said and promised by the angel is taken to heart by Mary, and believed! For as Gabriel has said, **"nothing will be impossible with God"** (v37). May Mary, the mother of Jesus, serve for us as one to honor and praise for her obedience and faith. And may we like Mary view ourselves humbly as servants of God, the recipients of immeasurable grace, and walk with confidence in the assignment given to us from the Lord. **"And Mary said, 'Behold, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word'"** (v.38).

THE PROMISED SON

With the favor of God upon her, the angel tells Mary **"you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus"** (v. 31). Oh, what honor to carry a child, and the honor greater still to bear the savior of the world! The one who will reside full term in the womb of the poor, young woman from Nazareth is the Christ, whose name will be Jesus. And Jesus, the angel says, **"will be great"** (v. 32).

Just like John the Baptist, Jesus is foretold to be great. But John is great because of the greatness of Jesus; without him, John would be nothing more than a raving lunatic who lives in the desert eating bugs and wearing camel hair. Why do I bring this up? Because I believe that there is a desire within many people, but especially among men, to do great things worthy of honor and remembrance. But because of the sin in human hearts, so many of us strive for what the world calls great, seeking after our own glory rather than the glory of God. The truth is that apart from Jesus, any semblance of “greatness” we could win for ourselves amounts to nothing; without God, it’s as vain as eating bugs alone in the desert for its own sake. John the Baptist lived for Jesus’ glory, not his own, saying “he must increase, but I must decrease” (Jn. 3:30). John’s greatness echoes in eternity because of what he accomplished not for his name, but for the name and the glory of Jesus.

The nature of the Lord Jesus’ greatness is immediately revealed in Gabriel’s announcement: **“He will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David”** (v. 32). Here we find the declaration of Christ’s Messianic reign. Mary is told that her son is the long-awaited Savior from the royal line of King David, the fulfillment of God’s covenant promise that one of David’s descendants would sit upon an everlasting throne (2 Sam. 7:12–16). Gabriel continues, **“and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end”** (v.33). This is not merely the announcement of a birth, but the announcement of a King’s coronation and the arrival of his kingdom.

For centuries, God’s people had been waiting for this moment. The prophets had spoken repeatedly of a coming King who would establish the rule and reign of God among his people. Isaiah foretold, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder” (Isa. 9:6). He goes on to say, “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom” (Isa. 9:7). Daniel likewise saw a day when God would establish an everlasting kingdom that would never be destroyed (Dan. 2:44). The birth of Jesus marks the dawning of those promises. The King has arrived, and with him comes the kingdom of heaven breaking into this world.

One can only imagine what thoughts were filling Mary's mind as Gabriel spoke these words. Like every faithful Jewish believer, she knew the promises of God. She knew the stories of David, the prophecies of Isaiah, and the hope of Israel. The kingdom of heaven was coming into human history through the child she would carry in her womb. In response, she asks **"How will this be, since I am a virgin?"** (v.34). Mary does not question whether God will accomplish what he has promised. She simply wonders how it will happen. The conception of Jesus would not occur through ordinary human means but through the supernatural work of God himself. Just as the Spirit of God hovered over creation in the beginning (Gen. 1:2), the Holy Spirit would now overshadow Mary, bringing forth the promised son.

QUESTIONS

What do Gabriel’s words about Jesus reveal about who he is and why he came?

How does Mary’s response to Gabriel differ from Zechariah’s earlier response, and what does that teach us about how to respond to God’s Word in faith?

What does Gabriel’s statement, “For nothing will be impossible with God” (v. 37), teach us about God’s power and our limitations?

Be honest: how might you need a similar encouragement today?

CHAPTER 4

LUKE 1:39-45

Mary Visits Elizabeth

My family and I love to travel, particularly when it means getting out of the city and spending time somewhere scenic. Some of our favorite trips have been to visit family in Colorado. Living in San Antonio, we sit right on the edge of the Texas Hill Country. You can experience vastly different landscapes in just a few hours of driving. The same road that traces over rolling hills coiled by snaking, glass-clear rivers and creeks will before long take you to the arid, open country of West Texas with its rich red earth and vistas that stretch for mile after endless mile. There is something about leaving the city behind and moving into the countryside that quiets the soul and causes you to slow down. Lengthy road trips like these are incredibly refreshing to me. I usually return home ready to work with fresh ideas, strengthened convictions, and greater clarity regarding where the Lord is leading, whether that be for our church, my family, or my personal ministry. There is something about getting away from the constant noise and demands of everyday life that creates space to think, pray, and listen more carefully. Even on a drive with a family of six and a dog.

Driving across Texas, I find it easy to envision the events of Luke taking place. It's not hard at all to imagine John the Baptist shouting out there somewhere in the open, sun-scorched countryside of West Texas. And trekking over our own steep, rocky slopes, I can almost see Mary traveling **“with haste into the hill country”** (v.39). Her journey was far more perilous: negotiating precarious ridges, deep-cut valleys, unfamiliar villages, and wilderness paths on foot or by mule, all while pregnant carrying the Son of God. What thoughts must have been running through her mind as she made her way from Nazareth into the hill country of Judea? Luke gives us only a brief description of the journey, but it is enough to invite our imagination into the scene. A young woman, freshly entrusted with the greatest promise in human history, makes her way through the hills to visit her family, while the kingdom of heaven quietly begins its descent to the earth.

JOY OF THE UNBORN

When Mary arrived at **“the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth”** (v. 40), the response was immediate and extraordinary. We are told that **“when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb”** (v. 41). This isn’t to be read as an ordinary reaction, like “she felt the baby move.” Something remarkable is taking place within Elizabeth’s womb: her unborn son, the child who would one day prepare the way for the Messiah, is already responding to his presence from inside the womb of his mother.

“I can’t just pass over the reality of what’s taking place here. We have a response to Mary’s presence not only from Elizabeth but also from Elizabeth’s unborn child, whose first testimony to Jesus—his first heralding of the King—takes place even before he is born” (Sproul 2020, 28). The one who would later stand along the Jordan River, proclaiming “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn. 1:29), begins his ministry while still in his mother’s womb. Even before he’s born, John is fulfilling his God-given role as the forerunner of Christ.

Modern society increasingly insists that the unborn are nothing more than undeveloped tissue – clumps of cells with the potential for life, rather than actual human beings. Luke will not allow us to adopt such a view. These children are not presented as “potential” people awaiting real personhood at birth. Baby John the Baptist is presented as a living child who responds, rejoices, and bears witness to Christ while still in the womb. And King Jesus has arrived already here in the story, though Mary is likely only in the earliest stages of pregnancy. No sermon has been preached. No miracle has been performed. No disciple has been called. Yet the presence of Christ is already prompting a response. The baby John cannot help but react to the arrival of the promised King, and Elizabeth describes him as leaping **“for joy”** (v. 44). The forerunner of the Messiah is already doing what he was created to do: pointing people to Jesus.

The significance of this scene cannot be overstated. The kingdom of God is drawing near, and even the unborn prophet responds to the arrival of the promised King. Luke’s account reminds us that life in the

womb is precious before God and that the Lord Jesus Christ is worthy of worship and recognition even from the very beginning of his earthly life.

ELIZABETH'S RESPONSE

Here among the opening paragraphs of Luke's Gospel, we find one of the most remarkable confessions in Scripture. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth **"exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!'"** (v.42). Notice that Elizabeth's blessing ultimately centers upon Jesus. Mary is blessed because she has been chosen by God for a unique role in redemptive history, but the greater blessing is the child she carries. The fruit of her womb is the promised Messiah, the Savior of the world. Mary's significance is intrinsically connected to Jesus. In this way we see the Scripture honors her, but always in relation to the Christ she bears.

Elizabeth then asks, **"And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"** (v. 43). Remember, Jesus has not yet been born. Yet Elizabeth, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, recognizes exactly who he is. She refers to the unborn Jesus as "my Lord." Elizabeth understands that the child in Mary's womb is no ordinary child. He is her Lord and savior. Here we find the first profession of faith in Christ in Luke's gospel. Luke is already presenting evidence of Christ's identity before his birth. Jesus is already being worshiped as Lord.

Elizabeth continues, **"For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy"** (v. 44). This is how we know that baby John the Baptist's movement in the womb was not merely the normal movement of an unborn child.

Finally, Elizabeth says, **"And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord"** (v. 45). This statement is meant to be seen as an intentional contrast with Zechariah. Earlier in Luke 1, Zechariah responded to Gabriel's announcement with doubt and was rendered unable to speak (Lk 1:20). Mary also asked a question in response to the angel's message, but her response was fundamentally different. She believed God. Though she did not understand every detail, she trusted the one who made the promise. Elizabeth therefore pronounces a blessing upon her faith.

There is an important lesson here for every Christian. Mary's blessedness is not ultimately found in her role as the mother of Jesus, though that role is uniquely significant. Here, Elizabeth specifically points to Mary's faith. She believed that what God said would come to pass. Throughout Scripture, God's people are repeatedly called to trust God's promises before they see their fulfillment. Mary stands as an example of humble faith that takes God at his word even when the circumstances seem impossible.

Moreover, I find it important to note who is commending Mary. Elizabeth is both Mary's relative and friend. This entire scene suggests a deep affection and friendship between these two women. There is something powerful about having your faith recognized by those who know you best. Elizabeth knew Mary's character. She knew her circumstances. She understood the personal cost that Mary would pay to walk in obedience to her calling. And so she commends her faithfulness. There is a unique encouragement that comes when a trusted friend, family member, or fellow believer recognizes God's work in your life and tells you.

Far too often Christians are quick to criticize and slow to encourage. Yet Elizabeth shows us a better way. If you have a friend who is walking faithfully with the Lord, commend them. If you know someone who is obeying Christ in difficult circumstances, encourage them. If you see evidence of God's grace in another believer's life, say so. One of the simplest ways that we can strengthen the body of Christ is by recognizing and celebrating God's faithfulness in one another.

And may we all be like Mary. May we trust the promises of God even when we cannot yet see how they will come to pass. May we believe what God has spoken, submit ourselves to his will whatever the cost, and walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). Mary believed, and she was blessed. The same God who proved faithful to her remains faithful to his people today.

QUESTIONS

What does John's leap in Elizabeth's womb reveal about the identity and greatness of Jesus Christ, even before his birth?

What does this passage teach about the value of life in the womb and God's work before birth?

Elizabeth calls Mary "the mother of my Lord" (v. 43). Why is that confession so significant?

How do Elizabeth's words encourage believers to celebrate God's grace in the lives of others rather than envy it? CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 5

LUKE 1:46-56

Mary's Song of Praise

Following Elizabeth's pronouncement of blessing over Mary, Mary bursts into song. This section of Scripture is commonly known as the *Magnificat*, a title derived from the opening words of the song in the Latin Vulgate translation: **"My soul magnifies the Lord"** (v. 46). The Vulgate is the Latin translation of the Scriptures, translated by Jerome in the late fourth century from the Hebrew and Aramaic Old Testament and the Greek New Testament. What follows is one of the most beautiful lyrical expressions of worship found anywhere in the Bible.

Mary's eyes are fixed upon God as her song overflows with praise and confidence in the faithfulness of the Lord. As we read the *Magnificat*, we are given a window into Mary's heart. We discover what stirred her affections, and what she believed about God. More importantly, we are reminded that whenever God reveals his grace, the proper response is to worship him.

MARY'S EXAMPLE

It is quite remarkable what this song reveals about Mary. The theological depth and understanding of the Old Testament present in these verses is rich. This young woman knew her Bible well. Her familiarity with the Scriptures had moved beyond mere intellectual knowledge; Mary had hidden the Word of God deeply within her heart (Ps. 119:11). Now, in this moment of worship, what had been stored within comes pouring out. As Jesus would later teach, out of the abundance of her heart her mouth speaks (Lk 6:45). Mary's song is saturated with the language, themes, and promises of the Scripture because her heart was saturated with it.

What a tremendous example for young Christians today and, frankly, for church leaders as well. Mary's understanding of God's Word puts many modern Christians to shame. Young believers should never believe the lie that they are too young to know God deeply, to treasure God's Word, or to develop rich theological convictions rooted

in the Bible. Mary demonstrates that a young person can possess profound biblical literacy, deep faith, and genuine spiritual maturity.

Young women in particular should pay close attention to Mary. The world operates on a false, twisted system of value in which attention is the currency du jour. So, many young women begin to evaluate their self-worth by their appearance, social status, follower count, academic accomplishments, or the various other ways one seeks to gain the approval of others. In the attention economy, the only thing that matters is what gets you seen; more often than not, the greatest rewards are reaped by those willing to stoop the lowest. Mary stands in stark contrast to all of it. She was not famous, wealthy, influential, or celebrated by society. She was a young woman from an obscure town whom most of the world would have overlooked. Yet she possessed something far greater than worldly recognition. She knew God. She knew his Word. She trusted his promises. Her beauty was not merely outward, but was rooted in a heart devoted to the Lord. When the greatest moment of her life arrived, what flowed from her lips was a worship song saturated with Bible. Her example reminds us that some of the most powerful work God accomplishes in the world is through women whose hearts are anchored in his Word and whose lives are surrendered to his will.

At the same time, Mary's example should challenge many modern approaches to ministry. Over the past several decades, much of the church has operated under the assumption that in order to reach young people, we must constantly entertain them. In many places, youth ministry became centered around being relevant, funny, and trendy. Fun and fellowship certainly have their place, but too often they come at the expense of serious Bible teaching. In an effort to avoid sounding "preachy," many ministries stopped preaching the Bible altogether. The result has been generations of young people who were taught to enjoy church activities but were never taught to treasure God's Word.

I've witnessed much of this firsthand in my years spent working in and closely observing various church ministries. By the time many students graduate out of the youth group, they have accumulated years of fun church experiences but very little solid biblical instruction. Youth group becomes college ministry, college ministry becomes

young adult ministry, and the same shallow patterns continue. Then, when life becomes difficult, cultural pressures intensify, or intellectual challenges arise in our nation, many find themselves without the biblical roots necessary to withstand the storm. It should not surprise us that many who later deconstruct their faith often do so with only a limited understanding of the Scriptures they claim to be rejecting.

However, the answer is not to abolish youth groups. We don't have a youth problem. We have a discipleship problem, and too many people and institutions pass the buck on their responsibility to disciple those they're called to care for. Churches bear responsibility. Pastors bear responsibility. And, first and foremost, parents bear responsibility. Long before a child ever enters a youth group, God has already assigned the primary task of discipleship not to his or her pastor or youth group leader, but to their Christian parents. It's the church's job to come alongside parents, equip them, and help them do as God has instructed: "These words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children" (Deut. 6:6-7). The home has always been God's primary training ground for spiritual formation.

Mary reminds us that young people are capable of far more than we often assume. Children can learn doctrine. Teenagers can understand theology. Young adults can develop deep convictions rooted in the Bible. Some reading this will assume I am advocating for a rigid, overly structured, academic approach to discipleship. I am not. I am not talking about the kind of theological rigor found in ivory towers and seminaries. I am talking about everyday, blue-collar, kitchen-table Christianity. This is much closer to what Mary's home would have looked like.

The Bible does not have to be presented in a way that is cold, sterile, overly academic or unnecessarily complicated. It simply needs to be present. God's Word should be read, discussed, memorized, sung, and woven into the normal rhythms of life. If you will take the time to listen, children ask incredible questions. They are naturally curious about God, heaven, sin, salvation, suffering, and the meaning of life. Rather than constantly entertaining and distracting them, we should seize those opportunities to teach them.

Mary's song did not emerge from nowhere. Somewhere along the way she learned the stories of Abraham, David, Hannah, and the prophets. She learned the promises of God. She heard the Scriptures read and discussed. It becomes immediately apparent that Mary is drawing from a heart that has been shaped by the Word of God for years. Her song echoes Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. It reflects the covenant promises made to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; 17:1-8). It draws upon the Psalms' language of praise, mercy, and God's faithfulness to the humble (Ps. 34:2-3; 103:17). The themes of God's holiness, his power, his concern for the lowly, his judgment against the proud, and his covenant faithfulness all flow naturally from her lips. Why? Because they had first been stored in her heart.

The Word of God became part of her thinking long before it became part of her song. Parents and church leaders should take note. We do not need to raise children who merely attend church. We need to raise children who know the Scriptures, love the Lord their God, and are able to recognize God's faithfulness when he moves in their lives.

CHRISTIANS TODAY

I fear many Christians today have the opposite problem. We are saturated with news, politics, social media, entertainment, podcasts, sports, and an endless stream of largely meaningless information. Our minds are filled with thousands of voices speaking to us every day, yet many believers struggle to spend even a few minutes reading their Bible. We live in a world where it is often easier to ask ChatGPT for an answer than mining for the treasures in the Scriptures ourselves. There is a place for tools and resources, but no tool can replace the work of opening God's Word, studying it, meditating upon it, and allowing it to shape the soul.

Too often we are merely chasing information rather than pursuing transformation. The Bible certainly reveals information, but with the intention of formation. We live in a day where all we want is to know the right answers, say the right things, hold the right positions, and maintain the appearance of godliness. Yet Paul warns of those who have "the appearance of godliness, but denying its power" (2 Tim. 3:5). Biblical Christianity is not merely possessing information

about God. It is being transformed by the truth of God resulting in a life that looks like Christ, hence the name “Christian.”

Trials and strife will come to all of us at many points throughout our lives. They catch us off guard and break open our hearts to spill out whatever we’ve stored up inside of them. Often it’s anxiety. Fear. Anger. Confusion. Grumbling. And when these things come out, they always make the suffering that much worse for ourselves and everyone around us. But when the Word of God is within our hearts, it bears out as a pleasing aroma, bringing peace and strengthening our resolve. Mary’s song reminds me of something the famous 19th-century British preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon once said about John Bunyan: “Why, this man is a living Bible! Prick him anywhere; his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him” (Staff 2016).

Mary reminds us that God’s people should be so familiar with the Scriptures that biblical truth becomes the natural language of the soul. This doesn’t mean speaking in “Christianese,” using overly spiritualized language and clichés in a show of performative godliness. No, it’s when the Word of God has been woven into the fabric of everyday life. When we pray, the Bible shapes our prayers. When we worship, the Bible shapes our praise. When we suffer, the Bible steadies our hearts. When we rejoice, the Bible directs our gratitude toward God.

Young Mary stands as a challenge to every generation of believers. She did not possess a study Bible, a podcast library, a seminary education, or an endless collection of Christian books. The lesson is simple: if we want our lives to magnify the Lord as Mary’s did, then we must fill our hearts with the same Word that filled hers.

GOD MY SAVIOR

Mary’s song reveals that she did not see herself as the hero of the story, but as a humble servant of the God who saves. This is exactly what she proclaims. God is her Savior, and he **“has looked on the humble estate of his servant”** (v. 48). Mary understood something many people miss. She was blessed by God, highly favored by God, chosen by God, and yet she still needed saving.

Notice where Mary's attention remains fixed through the song. Her focus is **"he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name"** (v. 49). The entire song is God-centered. This is what true worship does. It makes much of God. It is the essence of what *magnificat* means.

Magnification can be used in several senses. It can be used when something small has been made out to be much larger or far grander than it actually is, exaggerating its importance or its meaning. To magnify can also mean to focus, to bring clarity to something difficult to see and better understand the truth of a thing, as with a telescope gazing deep into space to study the wonders of the cosmos. When Mary says, **"My soul magnifies the Lord"** (v.46), she is not suggesting that God becomes greater because of her worship. God is already infinitely great, glorious, and worthy of praise. Nothing we do can add to his greatness. Rather, Mary's worship functions like the telescope. It brings the greatness of God into sharper focus. It helps us see God more clearly, more accurately, and more wonderfully than before.

Mary magnifies God as her savior but also as the savior for all humanity. **"His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation"** (v. 50). If you are reading this today, you have to understand that you need mercy. Mercy is God withholding what we deserve, and what we deserve is judgment. We deserve the wrath of God against our sin. Yet through Christ, that judgment is withheld from us, diverted from us, and placed upon Jesus at the cross. And grace is the divine act of receiving what we do not deserve. Grace is God's unmerited favor poured out upon undeserving sinners. We are saved by grace alone, but that grace flows from God's mercy. God "has caused us to be born again... according to his great mercy" (1 Pet. 1:3). Mercy removes our condemnation. Grace brings us into God's family. This is why I never tire of reminding people that there is more mercy and grace in Jesus than there is sin in you. Mary's song magnifies the greatness of God, but in doing so it also magnifies our need for salvation.

After this beautiful song, Mary **"remained with her about three months and returned to her home"** (v. 56). Soon the road ahead would become difficult. But for now, Mary leaves with her heart fixed upon God, trusting that what he promised he would surely accomplish.

QUESTIONS

What does Mary’s song teach us about the character of God?

What does Mary’s song reveal about the condition of her heart?

How does Mary’s praise demonstrate a deep knowledge of Scripture and God’s covenant promises?

How can meditating on God’s Word shape our prayers and worship the way it shaped Mary’s?

CHAPTER 6

LUKE 1:57-80

The Birth of John the Baptist

If you'll remember, Elizabeth was barren. She and her husband, Zechariah, had undoubtedly desired children and prayed for children, yet she remained unable to conceive throughout her childbearing years. Then, after those years had long passed and any natural hope of pregnancy had faded, the angel Gabriel appeared and announced that God was going to work a miracle. The child they had long prayed for would finally come. Now the promise has become reality, **“and her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her”** (v. 58).

GOD'S MERCY & KINDNESS

Notice carefully what the people celebrate. They celebrate the mercy of God. It's not that they don't celebrate the arrival of a baby, but it's that they recognize that this child is evidence of God's kindness toward Elizabeth. The miracle points beyond itself to the God who performed it. Their rejoicing is ultimately worship.

Over the years, I have watched God work in similar ways among women who longed to have children yet were unable to conceive or who endured the heartbreak of repeated miscarriages. One woman I know was told by doctors that she would never be able to have children, but the Lord had a different plan. That woman was my mother. Not only did she have me as her first child, she eventually had four in all. Whenever I read stories like Elizabeth's, I cannot help but think of my own mother and many of the women in our church.

Ministering through seasons like these can be both beautiful and difficult. As a pastor, I have sat with couples through tears, disappointments, doctor's appointments, failed treatments, miscarriages, and years of unanswered questions. I have also had the joy of sitting with those same couples when the Lord answered their prayers.

In our home, there is rarely a season when we are not praying for someone who desires a child. My children have become diligent intercessors in this regard. Around our dinner table and during family prayer time, they regularly petition the Lord for the fruitful wombs of women in our church. It has become a normal part of our family's life. We have seen God answer those prayers time and time again. Yet there are still women waiting. There are still couples hoping. There are still families praying through tears for God to do what only he can do. The birth of John the Baptist here is a reminder that God can.

Because of that, celebrations surrounding pregnancy and birth carry special significance at our church. Like Elizabeth's friends and relatives, we love celebrating new mothers and expectant mothers. There is something uniquely joyful when a woman who has struggled to conceive finally becomes pregnant, or when a child is conceived after the sorrow of miscarriage. The rejoicing feels deeper because everyone remembers the waiting and the pain. The celebration becomes not merely about the child, but about the faithfulness of God that brought the child.

By God's grace, the Lord has been exceedingly kind to our church. We have watched him bless many families with children. Every month another baby is being born, another pregnancy is being announced, or another family is preparing to welcome a child into the world. We do not take that for granted. We recognize, as Elizabeth's friends recognized, that these things are evidence of God's mercy. Children are not owed to us. They are gifts from the Lord (Ps. 127:3). And so we rejoice with those who rejoice. We celebrate God's kindness wherever we see it; for every child, every answered prayer, every healthy birth, and every reminder that the Lord remains the giver of life.

HIS NAME IS JOHN

The naming of a child carries tremendous significance throughout the Bible. From the very beginning of the world, the act of naming things has always been connected to authority and dominion. In the Garden of Eden, God brought the animals to Adam, and Adam exercised his God-given stewardship by naming them (Gen. 2:19-20). Throughout the Old Testament, we find parents carefully naming their children, often marking significant moments in their

lives or commemorating God's work among his people. Every culture develops traditions surrounding names because names matter.

Because of the barrenness of Elizabeth, we would expect the naming of her child to carry even more weight. Her relatives expected the child to be named according to family custom, likely after Zechariah himself or another relative. In their minds, this was how things had always been done. So, when Elizabeth declares that the child shall be called John, the family immediately objects: **“None of your relatives is called by this name”** (v. 61). This child was not being given an ordinary name because he would not live an ordinary life. His name had already been chosen by God before his conception. Gabriel had specifically instructed Zechariah, “you shall call his name John” (Lk 1:13). The naming here was about obedience to God's revealed will.

The tension here reminds us why Zechariah had been silent all these months. When Gabriel first appeared to him in the temple and announced that Elizabeth would bear a son, Zechariah responded with unbelief. As a result, Gabriel declared, “you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words” (Lk. 1:20). For months, he waited.

Now the moment of decision arrives. The relatives make signs to Zechariah and ask what the child should be called. Taking a writing tablet, he inscribes, **“His name is John”** (v. 63). Notice that he does not write, “His name shall be John,” as though he were making the decision. He simply writes, “His name is John.” God had already named the boy. Zechariah was simply agreeing with what God had said.

Immediately after Zechariah agrees to his son's name, **“his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God”** (v. 64). Zechariah's speech restored is evidence from God that this child's name was certainly John. Luke then tells us that **“fear came on all their neighbors”** (v. 65). Everyone recognized that something extraordinary was taking place. The hand of God was clearly upon this child and this family. News began spreading throughout the hill country of Judea, and people started asking, **“‘What then will this child be?’ For the hand of the Lord was with him.”** (v. 66). They knew this was no ordinary birth. They knew this was no ordinary child.

Of course, the answer is that John would become the forerunner for Jesus, the voice crying out in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord. But before any of that unfolds, Luke, writing his friend Theophilus a captivating testimony, allows the anticipation to build. The silence of four hundred years has been broken. God is speaking again.

ZECHARIAH'S PROPHECY

The first words out of Zechariah's mouth after months of silence were spoken in affirmation of God's naming of John. The next words recorded from Zechariah are a prophetic song. This is the second hymn found in Luke's Gospel and, like Mary's *Magnificat*, is commonly known by its Latin title, *Benedictus*, taken from its opening words: **"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel"** (v. 68).

Just as Elizabeth had been filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke prophetically concerning Mary and Jesus (Lk. 1:41-45), Zechariah is now filled with the Holy Spirit and bursts forth in praise. "Since Zechariah was a reliable witness due to his character (1:6) and his being filled by the Spirit, the hymn that follows reveals the divine understanding of the relationship of John the Baptist to Jesus and their respective roles" (Stein 1992, 99). Through Zechariah's song, God himself explains what is taking place. John is not the center of the story. He is the forerunner. Jesus is the promised Messiah. John prepares the way; Jesus brings salvation. John is the herald; Jesus is the King. The song serves as a theological interpretation of the events surrounding both births and helps us understand how God's long-awaited promises are finally being fulfilled.

The salvation that comes through Jesus Christ is the same salvation promised through the house of David and declared **"by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old"** (v. 70). Throughout the Bible, God had been steadily revealing his redemptive purpose, pointing forward to the one who would come and bring deliverance to his people.

GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES

As Zechariah testifies that the Lord will deliver his people, **"that we should be saved from our enemies"** (v. 71), it is important for us to see that this deliverance goes beyond merely national or personal enemies. Certainly Israel had many adversaries throughout her history, and the

hope of deliverance from oppression was deeply embedded in their expectation of the Messiah. But Zechariah's prophecy is reaching further than political liberation alone. It is pointing to a deeper salvation, one that addresses the ultimate enemies of God's people—sin, death, and Satan himself. The coming Messiah will not merely rescue Israel from Rome, but will deliver his people from the far greater bondage that enslaves all humanity. "Rather, the ultimate enemy that will be crushed by the horn of salvation is the devil, the prince of darkness, and all his minions who are part of the curse—death, darkness, disease, and everything else that puts a shadow over the joy of human life" (Sproul 2020, 48).

Zechariah's prophecy reminds us that God is fulfilling his promises. He is clear to indicate that this great salvation is rooted in God's covenant faithfulness, showing the same theme found in Mary's *Magnificat*, where God **"has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy"** (v. 54), and **"as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever"** (v. 55). What God promised long ago is now about to happen. The promise that began in the garden after Adam and Eve sinned against God, would be fulfilled. "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15).

This is often called the *protoevangelium*, the first proclamation of the gospel. At the beginning of human history, God announces that humanity will have a savior. There will come one born of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent, though he himself will be wounded in the process. The promise continued to be affirmed and articulated by God throughout history. God swore it again to Abraham, when he promised that through Abraham's offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3; 22:17–18), and confirmed it once more when he pledged to be God both to Abraham and his descendants after him (Gen. 17:7). This same covenant faithfulness is seen when God "remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" in the days of Israel's slavery (Ex. 2:24), and when God established his enduring promise to David of an everlasting throne and kingdom (2 Sam. 7:12–16; Ps. 89:3–4). The prophets continued to tell of Israel's hope in this covenant mercy, speaking of an everlasting covenant of steadfast love for David (Isa. 55:3), a coming King whose reign would never end

(Isa. 9:6–7), and a new covenant marked by forgiveness and transformed hearts (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:26–27). Even at the close of the Old Testament, the expectation remained that God would act in faithfulness to “show... steadfast love to Abraham” and fulfill what He had sworn (Mic. 7:20). Zechariah now declares that this long-awaited mercy has arrived in Jesus, a truth later affirmed in the New Testament when Paul proclaims that the promise made to the fathers is fulfilled in Jesus (Acts 13:32–33), that Christ has come to confirm those promises (Rom. 15:8–9), and that “all the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor. 1:20).

What we are witnessing, then, is not merely the beginning of a new chapter, but the climax of an old story. From Abraham to David to the prophets, every thread of redemptive history has been moving toward this moment. In the birth of John, God begins to break his silence. In the coming of Jesus, God fulfills his promises. And in Zechariah’s prophecy, we are reminded that what God begins, God always completes. Ours is a God of all mercy, and he is not forgetful. His covenant is unbroken, and his salvation is impartial. It is full, final, and forever secured in the house of David through Jesus Christ our Lord.

RAISING A PROPHET

John the Baptist would grow up learning all of this from his father Zechariah, being equipped by his dad for his mission as he **“grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel”** (v. 80). We should not overlook the connection and calling placed upon Zechariah in this story. It is clear that he understood, at least in part, the role his son would play in the unfolding plan of God, and the greatness of the Jesus whom his son would serve.

Before John could ever prepare the way for the Lord publicly, his father would first prepare him privately before sending him to the wilderness as ordained by God. I’ve never heard a sermon, nor commentary speak to this. I find it important enough to comment. We’ve already been told of Zechariah and Elizabeth’s godly character. They would have known the command of God to raise their children in the way of the Lord (Deut. 6:6–7). While most fathers do not know all that God will do through their children, Zechariah was given a glimpse into God’s purpose for his son’s life. Even so, his responsibility was

still the same: faithfulness in the ordinary duties of fatherhood, instruction in the Scriptures, and formation in the fear of the Lord.

In this we are reminded that Christian fathers carry a sacred responsibility. We may not know whether our children will stand before kings or live quietly in obscurity, but we are called to raise and nurture them in the admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). Zechariah's example calls fathers to take seriously the shaping of their children's understanding of God's Word and God's ways.

QUESTIONS

What does Zechariah’s restored speech teach us of God’s mercy and discipline, and also of Zechariah’s obedience and faith?

What does Zechariah’s story teach us about the roles of Christian fathers?

How can this be both an encouragement and a directive to Christian fathers today?

What does John’s life in the wilderness teach us about calling, preparation, and faithfulness before public ministry?

CHAPTER 7

LUKE 2:1-7

The Birth of Jesus Christ

As we look at one of the most famous passages in the entire Bible, read in churches and Christian homes every Christmas season the world over, it can be difficult to give this text the careful consideration it deserves. Most readers are immediately drawn to the familiar details: a poor young Mary and her betrothed husband Joseph, a crowded town with no room for them, and a child laid in a manger. While those details are certainly important, and we will give attention to the swaddling cloths and the manger scene, Luke's primary focus is on the sovereign hand of God directing every event surrounding the birth of Christ.

Luke wants us to see that the arrival of Jesus is not the result of chance, circumstance, or human planning. It is the unfolding of God's eternal decree. Just as the Lord sovereignly worked through unbelieving rulers such as Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus the Great, and Artaxerxes I to accomplish his purposes in redemptive history, so here God's plan advances through the decree of Caesar Augustus. The emperor gives the order, but God is the one moving history toward Bethlehem, exactly as he promised centuries before.

THE CENSUS

As I have sought to explain previously, and as Luke himself informs his readers, his desire is to write an accurate and orderly account concerning the life of Jesus Christ (Lk. 1:1–4). Therefore, when he begins the account of Christ's birth with the words, **“In those days”** (v. 1), he is speaking generally rather than providing an exact date. This is because neither Luke nor we possess the precise dating information. Rather than pretending certainty where none exists, Luke simply situates these events within a known historical period.

“This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.” (v. 2). While we do not have a surviving record of this particular registration described by Luke, we do possess overwhelming evidence

for the historicity of Caesar Augustus and Quirinius at this time. We also have evidence both inside and outside of Scripture that Quirinius was involved in administrative functions related to censuses and taxation as told in Acts 5:37 and recorded by the first-century Jewish historian Josephus. “The heart of the problem... is the dating of the census within the rule of Quirinius. It is the date, not the existence of the census that is problematic” (Stein 1992, 105). There is abundant historical evidence that the Roman Empire conducted censuses for taxation purposes. These censuses “had sinister implications. It was not just counting people in order to see how many there were, and what population trends were... [but] so that the government would be able to tax people the maximum. A census usually announced greater poverty and exploitation” (González 2010, 33 italics mine). Given these circumstances, “Luke’s readers knew all about the census system he was describing, so for him to have invented the story would have been foolish” (MacArthur 2009, 145).

Some commentators choose to leave these discussions to the academics, preferring not to burden their readers with technical historical debates. While I understand that approach, I have chosen to mention it because I do not want my readers to be unaware of the objections often raised against the biblical text. Christianity has never feared investigation. Luke certainly did not. In fact, Luke’s entire Gospel is the product of careful investigation. Honest questions should not frighten believers, even if they’re difficult to answer. Rather, they should drive us deeper into the evidence.

What is often overlooked in these discussions is that Luke was writing during a period when eyewitnesses were still alive. Many of the events he records could have been challenged by those who lived through them. Furthermore, Luke’s reliability as a historian has repeatedly been vindicated over time. Again and again, discoveries in archaeology and ancient history have demonstrated that details once questioned by skeptics were, in fact, accurate. While there remain aspects of the historical record that scholars continue to debate, there is no compelling reason to conclude that Luke fabricated these events. Quite the opposite. The evidence consistently points toward Luke being a careful, trustworthy historian who was committed to recording what actually happened.

THE BIRTH

Luke's purpose here is not merely to satisfy our historical curiosity. His focus is for us to see that God is sovereignly orchestrating world events to accomplish his promises. Whether Caesar Augustus understood it or not, his decree served the purposes of God. The emperor issued the command, but the Lord directed the outcome. A census moved Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and in doing so fulfilled what God had spoken centuries earlier through the prophet Micah: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah... from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel" (Mic. 5:2).

Traveling nearly ninety miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem was no small undertaking under the best of circumstances. Yet Mary made the trip while heavily pregnant, enduring the discomfort and uncertainty that accompanied such travel. Shortly after Joseph and Mary arrive, **"the time came for her to give birth"** (v. 6).

Then comes the moment most familiar to readers of the Christmas story: Mary **"wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn"** (v. 7). We have heard these words so often that their significance can be lost on us. Yet when these verses are read to children for the first time, an explosion of questions usually follows. And I think that kind of unfettered curiosity is the proper response. May we never grow so familiar with these details that we become numb to them and they leave us unmoved. After all, Jesus calls us to receive the kingdom with childlike faith (Mk. 10:15). So pay attention to the children and try it sometime. Read these lines to a room full of grade-school kids and then simply let them ask questions. You'll hear, "Why was there no room for Jesus?" "Why was He born around animals?" "What is a manger?" "Hey, my daddy was baptized in one of those!"

I am convinced that some of the most insightful observations about the Christmas story come not from scholars in universities but from children hearing the account with fresh ears. They have not yet learned to rush past the details. They have not become numb to the wonder of it all, and that's exactly what the Christmas story should excite—wonder! The questions of children often expose how quickly adults can

stop marveling at the text. Children instinctively recognize that there is something astonishing about the King of kings entering the world in such humble circumstances. Perhaps we would see it more clearly ourselves if we learned to read these familiar verses with fresh eyes once again.

We see this regularly in our children's ministry. I have seen it firsthand in my own home. Children have not yet learned the grown-ups' habit of pretending they understand everything. They are willing to ask the obvious questions. In many ways, they read the Bible the way we all should.

At this very moment, as I'm writing this sentence, my children are watching the film *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. Why they are watching a Christmas show in June, I have no clue, but they are. They have no idea what exactly I'm working on, but God does. If you've never seen the movie, the story follows the Herdman children, six siblings with bad reputations, who do a hostile takeover of the town's beloved Christmas pageant. Being completely unfamiliar with the Christmas story, the Herdman kids are shocked by details that the local churchgoers had long stopped noticing. They cannot understand why no one would make room for a pregnant woman. They wonder why a King would be born in a barn. They are amazed that angels would appear to shepherds. In their blunt and often humorous way, the Herdmans force everyone around them to reconsider the story they thought they already knew.

Let me invite you to do the same. Slow down. Consider what is taking place. The eternal Son of God has entered human history. The Creator of the universe has become a baby. The promised King of Israel has been laid in a feeding trough. If that does not strike us as astonishing, it may be because familiarity has dulled our sense of wonder.

Perhaps before moving on, you should allow yourself to ask questions. We should stare at the scene as children do. For there, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying where animals feed, is the Lord of glory. The humble circumstances do not diminish his majesty. They magnify it. For this is the kind of King Jesus came to be: not one who arrives demanding to be served, but one who comes in humility to serve and ultimately to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk. 10:45).

MAKING ROOM FOR JESUS

Luke has no idea that centuries later churches would be reenacting this scene in Christmas pageants, that children would be dressing up as shepherds and wise men. For Luke, he is just telling his friend Theophilus about the birth of his King.

From what we can gather, Theophilus was a man of considerable means and influence. As we explored when reading Luke's opening address, "most excellent" (Lk. 1:3) is a title that we see used also in Acts to address Roman governors and political officials (Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25). Theophilus was likely educated, connected to the Roman world, and well acquainted with the political realities of the empire, including censuses, governors, and imperial decrees, that Luke has discussed here in our text. Yet Luke isn't trying to give him a history lesson, but invite him to know God. The God who rules over emperors also cares for the lowly. The God who moves nations and kings is willing to identify with ordinary people. The sovereign Lord of history enters history not through a palace, but through a manger.

This theme runs throughout Luke's Gospel. The humble are exalted. The proud are brought low. The poor hear good news. Sinners are welcomed. The overlooked are seen. The child born in Bethlehem is the fulfillment of everything Mary sang about in the *Magnificat*. God has drawn near to his people and lavished upon them his great mercy. Luke will later record Jesus saying, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Lk. 9:58). In many ways, that ministry begins here. The Savior who would one day have nowhere to lay his head begins his earthly life with a borrowed bed.

Earlier I mentioned that some of the most insightful observations about the Christmas story often come from children hearing it for the first time. One of my favorite questions children frequently ask is, "Why was there no room for them?" While Bethlehem had no room for the King, Luke wrote that his friend Theophilus would make room for King Jesus in his heart. That is, in many ways, the entire purpose of this Gospel. Luke is presenting evidence, eyewitness testimony, fulfilled prophecy, and the life, death, and resurrection of Christ so that Theophilus, and every reader after him, might believe, trust, and follow Jesus.

So, let me press this question upon every one of us. *Do you have room for Jesus?*

For many people, life has become crowded. Schedules are full. Minds are occupied. Hearts are distracted. We are so consumed with work, entertainment, anxiety, disappointment, bitterness, and fear that while we desperately need Christ, we have little room left to seek him while he may be found. Others are carrying wounds, burdens, and hardships that have left them weary and exhausted. Like Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem, there often seems to be no room left.

Yet the tragedy is not a lack of space in our calendars. It is a lack of room in our hearts. We make room for countless lesser things while neglecting the one truly necessary thing. We fill our lives with droning noise and wonder why we struggle to hear the voice of God. We stuff our minds with endless information and then wonder why our souls remain restless. We have room for ambition, recreation, politics, and entertainment, but little room for prayer, Scripture, worship, and communion with Christ.

Charles Spurgeon once said “Go where ye will, and there is no space for the Prince of Peace but with the humble and contrite spirits which by grace he prepares to yield him shelter” (Guthrie 2008, 63). The inn had no room for Jesus, but humble hearts always do. The Lord is still drawn to those who know their need for him. He still dwells with the contrite and lowly (Isa. 57:15). The question before us is not whether Bethlehem had room for Christ. The question is whether we do.

I have found over the years that hardship can have one of two opposing effects on a person. Some trials drive us toward Jesus. Others tempt us to close ourselves off from him. Disappointment can slowly convince us to settle into survival mode, where we simply go through the motions to avoid scrutiny, while being inwardly unmoved. We continue attending church. We continue calling ourselves Christians. Yet somewhere along the way, we stop making room for the Lord in our daily lives. We stop listening, praying and obeying. We stop opening our Bibles. We stop making room. Today, may we each make room for Jesus.

QUESTIONS

What does Caesar's decree reveal about God's sovereignty over rulers and history?

Why is Bethlehem necessary for the fulfillment of this moment in redemptive history?

What does the placement of Jesus in a manger reveal about how he enters the world he created?

How do you need to make room in your heart for Jesus today?

CHAPTER 8

LUKE 2:8-21

Shepherds Visited By Angels

God is often doing several things at once, though we are rarely aware of them. While Jesus is being born in Bethlehem, the Lord is simultaneously preparing the first public announcement of his arrival. God sends angels to **“shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night”** (v 8). The shepherds were nearby, and God wanted them to come meet their savior and King. We are not told why God chose the shepherds, nor are we told how many shepherds there were, only that they were faithfully doing the ordinary work assigned to them.

It is remarkable that the first people to hear the announcement of the newborn King were lowly shepherds. As you may already know, Jesus will later identify himself as the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10:11), and we can easily trace the theme of humility that runs throughout his life and ministry. So, for those a little more aware of this, it becomes easy to make those connections about God’s announcement to the shepherds. But Theophilus, the man to whom Luke is writing, may not have immediately recognized those connections. Over the years, I have often tried to read Luke’s Gospel from Theophilus’s perspective, especially in these familiar moments of the Christmas story. What a surprising scene this must have been.

Shepherds worked long, lonely nights, protecting their flocks from predators and thieves while the rest of the world slept. Their work wasn’t glamorous and largely unnoticed. It was not a prestigious occupation, especially in the eyes of educated and influential men like Theophilus. If someone were announcing the birth of a king, we would expect the message to go first to governors, priests, generals, or the wealthy elite. Instead, God sends his heavenly messenger to ordinary working men standing watch in the fields. In our modern world, we place such a high value on becoming somebody of great status or prestige that we often overlook the beauty of simply being an ordinary person faithfully doing the work God has entrusted to us, just like these shepherds.

This scene reminds us that God sees all things, and especially people, very differently than we do (1 Sam. 16:7). The kingdom of God is not built upon celebrity, influence, or worldly status, but upon humble servants who quietly and faithfully walk in obedience before him. Perhaps we should learn to see as God sees. May the Lord open our eyes to behold the extraordinary ways he works through ordinary people and ordinary faithfulness. For this is the way of the kingdom of God. God delivers his first announcement of the birth of Christ in the quiet darkness outside Bethlehem to men whose names we will never know. For those shepherds, what began as an ordinary night of faithful labor suddenly became the most extraordinary night of their lives.

THE HEAVENLY HOSTS

Without warning, **“An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them”** (v. 9). The word angel simply means “messenger,” but throughout the Bible we see that these heavenly beings are far more than gentle couriers. They are servants of the living God who execute his will and wage war on his behalf in the heavenly realms. Our modern culture has largely replaced the biblical picture of angels with sentimental images of chubby infants wearing diapers, tiny wings, halos, and harmless smiles. The Scriptures, however, know nothing of such caricatures. The angels of God are mighty servants who stand in his presence and carry out his commands. Jesus himself told Pilate that he could call upon “more than twelve legions of angels” if he desired (Matt. 26:53), invoking the imagery of an overwhelming heavenly army. Throughout the Scriptures these angelic beings fight spiritual battles, minister to God’s people, and execute orders from God (Dan. 10:13; Rev. 12:7–9). Our God is repeatedly called “the LORD of hosts,” the God who commands the armies of heaven (1 Sam. 17:45; Ps. 24:10).

It is no surprise, then, that the shepherds **“were filled with great fear”** (v. 9). They were not merely startled by an unexpected visitor. They found themselves standing before a messenger clothed in the unveiled glory of heaven. Fallen humanity cannot casually encounter such glory. The brightness of God’s glory surrounded them, and the appearance of this heavenly warrior army would have been

unlike anything they had ever imagined. If we can make a modern comparison, the scene is less like a Hallmark Christmas card and more like standing before heaven's special operations unit. Yet these mighty messengers have not come to destroy them. They have come to proclaim the greatest news the world has ever heard.

Even the announcement itself carries a militant tone. A King has been born. The angelic proclamation is the declaration that the kingdom of God has broken into human history. This is the beginning of the kingdom of heaven's siege on the earthly realm. The rightful King has entered enemy-occupied territory, and he shall evermore reign, just as Gabriel declared to Mary only a few months before (Lk. 1:33).

So-called "king" Herod understood the birth of Jesus in this way. When the magi, three wise men from the east, came into Jerusalem asking "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" (Matt. 2:2), Herod was "troubled, and all Jerusalem with him" upon hearing the news of Christ's birth. (Matt. 2:3). Herod perceived the birth of Jesus as a threat to his throne and responded by seeking to destroy the child (Matt. 2:16).

GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY

The angels bring great news to the shepherds! There are two parts to their proclamation. First, the nature of the news itself, and second, the people for whom this news is intended. We will consider each of these in turn.

The nature of the news itself is described as **"good news of great joy"** (v. 10). It is great news because there has never been, nor will there ever be, a greater announcement in human history. God has come to save sinners. The promised Savior of the world has arrived. I am convinced that every proclamation concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ ought to carry something of this same joyful urgency. I have often been puzzled by the ability of some Christians to speak about Jesus in bland, sterile, and lifeless ways—as though they were reciting facts from a textbook rather than announcing the greatest event the world has ever known. The angels did not mumble this announcement; they heralded it.

This is one of those passages that reminds every preacher that the manner in which we proclaim God's Word should match the message

itself. Such news should be preached with holy enthusiasm. After all, if the birth of Christ cannot stir our affections, what possibly could?

The angels are simply announcing news. News is not advice, a suggestion, a theological discussion, or a debate. It is the declaration that something has happened. Sadly, this is often how many Christians speak about Jesus—as though they are presenting an argument to be analyzed rather than proclaiming news. Yet think about how naturally we share other kinds of good news. We eagerly tell others about an incredible meal we enjoyed, a great movie we watched, a new restaurant we discovered, or exciting events in our own lives. When we share something we enjoy our voices become animated because we delight in what we are sharing. In the same way, the angels herald the birth of Christ with joyful proclamation. Their excitement is contagious because the news they carry is glorious. The angels are not gathering the shepherds for a Bible study or inviting them into a classroom lecture. They are heralds announcing a royal decree. Like town criers proclaiming the victory of a king, they declare, **“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”** (v. 11). How much more should those who know the risen Christ speak of him with genuine delight and holy enthusiasm?

But how are these shepherds supposed to find him? Bethlehem is not an enormous city, but surely other children had been born there. Should they search every home? Should they ask the midwives where babies had recently been delivered? How would they possibly know which child was the Messiah? God, in his kindness, makes the answer unmistakable. **“This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger”** (v. 12). Jesus will be the only baby sleeping in a feeding trough.

The shepherds need only follow the sign, and they will find exactly what God has promised. The Savior of the world is not difficult to recognize because God himself has pointed the way. The same remains true today. God has not hidden his Son from those who seek Him. He has plainly revealed him in the Scriptures and calls all people everywhere to come and behold the Christ. The invitation

first given to shepherds still echoes through the centuries:
“Come and see.” The Savior has been born, Christ the Lord.

FOR ALL THE PEOPLE

The second aspect of the angels’ announcement that deserves our attention is who this good news is for. The angel declares that it **“will be for all the people”** (v. 10). Certainly not everyone will receive it as good news, nor will everyone believe it, but the birth of Jesus Christ carries universal significance. Moreover, there is not a single person that this news should be withheld from. The birth of Jesus Christ changes the course of human history, and the invitation of the gospel extends to every tribe, tongue, nation, and people. Jesus is not merely the Jewish Messiah; he is the Savior of the world. The promise given to Abraham that through his offspring “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3) finds its fulfillment in the child lying in the manger.

As if the announcement from a single angel were not enough, **“suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God”** (v. 13). The birth of Christ is so glorious that one angel cannot adequately announce it. The courts of heaven burst into praise sung in chorus by innumerable angels, emphasizing both the greatness of the news itself and the vast scope of its intended reach.

The first words of their heavenly hymn direct all glory where it belongs: **“Glory to God in the highest”** (v. 14). Christmas is first and foremost about the glory of God. The incarnation is the supreme display of his wisdom, his faithfulness, his mercy, and his love. Yet the second line reveals the wonderful consequence of God’s glory being displayed in Christ: **“and on earth peace”** (v. 14). Through the birth of Jesus, God is making peace with sinful men and women. The war between a holy God and rebellious humanity will ultimately be reconciled through the death on a cross of the very child whose birth was proclaimed that night. The angels rejoice because the Prince of Peace has come, and through him, peace with God is now offered to all who believe.

After the angels departed, the shepherds **“went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger”** (v. 16). Upon finding Mary, Joseph, and the child exactly as the angels had said,

they began telling them and all who were present about everything they had seen and heard concerning this child. The first recipients of heaven's announcement immediately became its first human evangelists, joyfully proclaiming the good news that the Christ had been born.

PRAISE AND PONDER

The shepherds then **“returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them”** (v. 20). Their encounter with Christ did not leave them unchanged. They returned to their ordinary lives with extraordinary worship filling their hearts. The result of the shepherds' testimony was awe, wonder, and amazement among **all who heard it** (v. 18). While many marveled for a moment, **“Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart”** (v. 19). She cherished the events of that night; she held them close, turning them over in her mind and heart, meditating on the faithfulness of God and the mystery of his salvation.

May it be the same with us. May we not rush through these familiar Christmas passages simply because we have heard them so many times before. Instead, may we slow down, linger over the text, and allow our hearts to be stirred again with holy wonder. May we treasure these truths, ponder them deeply, and meditate upon the greatness of our God who humbled himself to save sinners. And if our affections have grown cold, if familiarity has dulled our amazement, may we ask the Lord to fan the flame once more until our hearts, like those of the shepherds, are filled with worship and praise.

QUESTIONS

Discuss what God’s announcement of the birth of Christ to the shepherds reveals?

Why is the “good news of great joy for all people” significant in the context of Israel’s expectations of the Messiah?

What can we learn from the angels’ worshipful celebration at the announcement of the birth of Jesus?

What does Mary’s response of “treasuring up all these things” teach us about how to process God’s work in our lives?

CHAPTER 9

LUKE 2:22–39

Jesus' Dedication

After Jesus' birth, Luke continues to emphasize the faithful obedience of Mary and Joseph to God. In accordance with God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:10–12) and the requirements of the Mosaic Law (Lev. 12:3), the infant Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day and formally given the name that heaven itself had appointed (Lk. 2:21)

Luke then moves forward to the completion of Mary's days of ceremonial purification. According to the Law, after the birth of a son a mother remained ceremonially unclean for forty days before presenting herself at the temple (Lev. 12:2–8). **“And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord”** (v. 22).

Throughout these opening chapters Luke repeatedly highlights this theme. Zechariah and Elizabeth walked blamelessly according to God's commands. Mary humbly submitted to God's will. Joseph faithfully obeyed the angel's instructions. Now together they bring Jesus to the temple exactly as the Law required. The Savior who came to fulfill the Law (Matt. 5:17) entered the world under the Law (Gal. 4:4–5), and from his earliest days his parents carefully walked in obedience to all that God had commanded.

There were two reasons Mary and Joseph traveled to Jerusalem and entered the temple. The first was to present and dedicate Jesus to the Lord, **“as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’”** (v. 23; cf. Ex. 13:2, 12–15). The second reason for their visit was Mary's ceremonial purification after childbirth: **“and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons’”** (v. 24). The conjunction, *and*, indicates that this was a distinct purpose for their journey. I make note of this because it is often overlooked that there were two distinct reasons for their visit.

According to Leviticus 12:6–8, a woman who had given birth was to bring a lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon or turtledove for a sin offering. However, if she could not afford a lamb, the Lord graciously provided for the poor by allowing the sacrifice of “two turtledoves or two pigeons” instead (Lev. 12:8). This small detail tells us much about the earthly circumstances of Jesus’ family. Mary and Joseph were not wealthy. They brought the offering permitted for those of modest means, demonstrating both their poverty and their faithful obedience to God’s Law.

JESUS’ DEDICATION

To the casual observer, Mary and Joseph would have appeared to be just another poor, young couple carrying their infant son into the temple, surrounded by the ordinary bustle of worshipers bringing sacrifices and offering prayers. Nothing about their appearance would have suggested that their child was the Creator of heaven and earth wrapped in human flesh.

We can see the consistent theme in Luke’s gospel so far: God uses the ordinary faithfulness of ordinary people to pull back the curtain and reveal the extraordinary work he is accomplishing. We saw it with Zechariah and Elizabeth, with the shepherds and the angels. And now, we will see it again as another ordinary, faithful servant recognizes the Savior of the world.

Luke introduces us to **“a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon”** (v. 25). Unlike Zechariah, Elizabeth, or Mary, we know almost nothing about his family or occupation. His greatness is not found in his public reputation, but in his private faithfulness as he was **“righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him”** (v. 25). Simeon was a man who loved God, trusted his promises, and patiently waited for the redemption that only the Messiah could bring.

The phrase *the consolation of Israel* is a reference to the messianic prophecies in Isaiah, where the Lord declares, “Comfort, comfort my people” (Isa. 40:1). Israel had endured centuries of waiting through periods of oppression, exile, and silence, all the while

longing for the day when God would finally send his Anointed One. Simeon belonged to that faithful remnant who believed God would keep his word and bring comfort to his people.

“It had been revealed to [Simeon] by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (v. 26). And here at Jesus’ dedication is the fulfillment of the Spirit’s revelation. We are told that it was the leading of the Holy Spirit that brought Simeon **“into the temple”** (v. 27). The same God who sovereignly directed Caesar’s decree, guided shepherds to the manger, and sent angels to Bethlehem, now leads Simeon into the temple at the precise moment Mary and Joseph arrive carrying Jesus. Simeon **“took him up in his arms and blessed God”** (v. 28).

SONG OF SIMEON

Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, Simeon bursts into song. This hymn, traditionally known by its Latin title *Nunc Dimittis*, taken from its opening words, “Now you are letting your servant depart,” is the third hymn recorded by Luke in these opening chapters of his Gospel. First came Mary’s *Magnificat* (Lk. 1:46–55), followed by Zechariah’s *Benedictus* (Lk. 1:68–79), and now Simeon’s *Nunc Dimittis* (Lk. 2:29–32).

Simeon’s hymn is the song of a man whose lifelong hope has finally been fulfilled. This elderly man has spent decades believing that he would not die until he had seen the Christ, trusting in a promise God had made to him. Now, holding the infant Jesus in his arms, his waiting is over and he begins his song. **“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word”** (v. 29). Simeon is full of age and satisfaction because of the faithfulness of God.

The hymn then broadens beyond Simeon himself to encompass the entire world: **“For my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel”** (v. 30–32). Simeon does not need to watch Jesus grow into adulthood, witness his miracles, or stand at the foot of the cross to know who he is. Holding the infant Christ in his arms is enough. His faith has

become sight. Yet his faith reaches even further, looking beyond the baby before him to the salvation this child will accomplish.

The child in Simeon's arms is not merely Israel's King but the Savior of the whole world. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Simeon rejoices that this promised Messiah will be **"a light for revelation to the Gentiles"** (v. 32). I need us to see the staggering nature of this declaration. It will not be until well into the book of Acts that many of the apostles fully grasp the Gentiles' inclusion in the gospel, and yet here, at the very beginning of Luke's Gospel, God makes his purpose unmistakably clear.

This has always been God's redemptive plan. Through Abraham all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3). The Servant of the Lord would be "a light for the nations" (Isa. 49:6), and the nations would come to his light (Isa. 60:1–3). Simeon's song celebrates the fulfillment of those ancient promises of God echoed through the Scriptures. The Messiah has come not only for Israel's glory but for the salvation of the Gentiles, extending God's mercy to the ends of the earth.

This incredible scene continues as Simeon concludes his song, while Mary and Joseph **"marveled at what was said about"** their son (v. 33). Though they had already received angelic announcements, witnessed miraculous events, and heard the testimonies of shepherds, Elizabeth, and Zechariah, God continued to confirm his promises through unexpected witnesses and Spirit-filled songs.

Turning specifically to Mary, Simeon says, **"Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel"** (v. 34). Here even from the very beginning, Jesus is presented as a dividing line. No one will remain neutral concerning him. Some will stumble over him in unbelief and fall. Others will humble themselves before him in faith and rise. Throughout Luke's Gospel this prophecy unfolds before our eyes. Jesus himself becomes the great dividing point of human history. As the Scriptures declare elsewhere, Jesus is both the cornerstone upon which God's people are built, and the stone over which many stumble (Isa. 8:14–15; 28:16; 1 Pet. 2:6–8).

Simeon continues, saying that Jesus will be **"a sign that is opposed"** (v. 34). The opposition begins almost immediately as we've already seen

with Herod, and will ultimately culminate in the events leading up to his sin atoning sacrifice on the cross. The child being dedicated in the temple will one day be rejected, mocked, beaten, and nailed to a Roman cross.

Then, Simeon adds a deeply personal and prophetic word to Mary: **“and a sword will pierce through your own soul also”** (v. 35). While Mary has been blessed beyond all women to bear the Messiah, she will also experience profound sorrow. The path of her son will lead to suffering, and as his mother she will feel that pain acutely. The sword Simeon describes is the anguish she will endure as she watches Jesus rejected by his people and ultimately crucified. The young mother standing in the temple holding her infant son cannot yet know all that lies ahead, but Simeon gives her a glimpse. Yet even this suffering serves a divine purpose. Simeon concludes, **“so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed”** (v. 35). Jesus will expose what is truly within people.

Lastly, Luke introduces us to the elderly **“prophetess, Anna,”** (v. 36). Like Simeon, she represents the faithful remnant of Israel who had patiently waited for the redemption God had promised. We are told here that after the death of her husband, she remained a widow and **“did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day”** (v. 37). Her long years of quiet faithfulness had not been wasted. In God’s perfect providence, Anna too was granted the joy and privilege of being present at Jesus’ dedication. **“Coming up at that very hour”** (v. 38), she joined Simeon, Mary, and Joseph in giving thanks to God for this extraordinary moment. The years of waiting had come to an end. The Messiah had arrived. Luke records that she **“began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem”** (v. 38). Like the shepherds before her, Anna immediately became a witness, proclaiming the good news to all who longed for God’s salvation. Her life reminds us that decades of faithful prayer and patient waiting are never in vain. The Lord remembers his promises, and in his perfect timing he delights to let his faithful servants see his salvation.

THE RETURN TO NAZARETH

After Mary and Joseph **“had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord”** (v. 39), they began the journey back to

Nazareth. We have already seen that after the shepherds recounted everything the angels had told them, “Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Lk. 2:19). I tend to do a lot of thinking and pondering while traveling. One cannot help but wonder what filled her thoughts as she traveled home with Jesus in her arms. Surely she reflected on the remarkable events surrounding his dedication—the song of Simeon, the thanksgiving of Anna, and the prophetic words that had been spoken over her son.

Yet among all those joyful moments, Simeon’s sobering prophecy must have lingered in her mind: **“and a sword will pierce through your own soul also”** (v. 35). At that moment she could scarcely have understood what those words would mean. Jesus was still an infant, but one day she would stand at the foot of a Roman cross and watch her son be crucified (Jn. 19:25–27). I share the same sentiment as R. C. Sproul as he reflects on this passage, “I wonder how many times she remembered what Simeon had said... Did she think of that moment when her child grew up and before her eyes was hanging on a cross, and at His death the soldier took his spear and pierced Jesus’ side? Do you think Mary felt that not just in her side but in her soul? She must have known then that prophecy had come to pass” (Sproul 2020, 65). The joy of Bethlehem would eventually give way to the agony of Calvary. What Mary could not fully comprehend on the road back to Nazareth would become unmistakably clear at Golgotha.

QUESTIONS

What does Simeon teach us about what it looks like to wait on God's promises?

What does Simeon's confession, "my eyes have seen your salvation," reveal about the identity of Jesus?

What does Simeon's warning to Mary about a sword reveal about the cost of following Jesus Christ?

How does this passage show that faithful waiting is never wasted in God's plan?

CHAPTER 10

LUKE 2:40-52

Jesus in the Temple

This next section of Luke's gospel is a rare look at Jesus' childhood, beginning and ending in near symmetry with verses noting his natural growth physically, as well as his remarkable spiritual maturity and wisdom. These observations intentionally emphasize both Jesus' true humanity and divinity. Like any ordinary child, Jesus grew physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially. He developed through the normal stages of human life, learning and maturing day by day. Additionally, these bookends highlight that Jesus experienced "the favor of God." It reminds the reader that the eternal Son of God truly entered the ordinary rhythms of human life and that Jesus didn't just appear human—he truly became man. Growing in wisdom and stature, he lived the life of human development like every other human being that ever walked this earth. Yet this ordinary human development was united to an extraordinary reality: Jesus is both fully God and fully man. His divine nature did not replace or diminish his humanity, nor did his humanity lessen his deity. Rather, in the mystery of the incarnation, the one Person of Christ possesses these two distinct natures.

Luke's description of Jesus growing in wisdom and favor does not imply that his divine nature somehow increased or matured. As the eternal Son, he is omniscient, unchanging, and perfect from all eternity. What Luke is describing is Jesus' genuine human nature. As a true man, Jesus learned to walk, to speak, to read the Scriptures, and to labor with his hands. He experienced authentic human growth while remaining without sin. Unlike every other child who has ever lived, his development was marked by perfect holiness and flawless obedience to the Father. The one who upheld the universe by the word of his power willingly humbled himself to grow as a child so that he might fully identify with humanity and become the perfect Savior for his people.

RITE OF PASSAGE

All Luke tells us about Jesus from the time of his dedication in the temple until he appears again at twelve years old is this: **“And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him”** (v. 40). Those few words summarize more than a decade of life in Nazareth, yet they clearly tell us that Jesus did not bypass normal childhood, but embraced it fully.

The next scene takes place when Jesus is twelve years old, an important age in Jewish culture. “At age thirteen, a Jewish young man becomes responsible for his own actions; he becomes a *bar mitzvah*, or son of the commandment, and he undergoes a ceremony to mark the occasion. According to the custom of the Jews at the time, when the boy was twelve, a year before *mar mitzvah*, the parents would take him to Jerusalem” (Sproul 2020, 68). This helps explain why Mary and Joseph brought Jesus with them on this particular pilgrimage.

Luke tells us that they went to **“Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover”** (v. 41), demonstrating once again the faithful devotion of this godly family. The Passover was the greatest feast on Israel’s calendar, commemorating God’s redemption of his people from slavery in Egypt (Ex. 12). It drew people from across the land to worship in Jerusalem and remember the mighty acts of the Lord.

This particular year, however, was especially significant because Jesus accompanied them. It is likely that Mary and Joseph intended to prepare him for the responsibilities that would soon accompany him as a young man. They would have shown him the temple courts, taking the time to explain things with intentionality, and recount the story of the Exodus, as they partook in the Passover celebration. Yet there is a beautiful irony here: the parents were introducing their son to these traditions of redemption, while all along he himself was the reality to which every sacrifice, every priest, and every Passover lamb ultimately pointed. The true Lamb of God walked the courts of the temple that had long anticipated his coming as a twelve year old boy.

Many Western Christians have largely lost the concept of intentional rites of passage that mark the transition from boyhood into manhood. Yet

throughout history, and across many cultures, societies have recognized that young men need to be prepared for the responsibilities of adulthood.

Years ago, while living in Kenya, I had the opportunity to learn about the Maasai tribe's traditional rite of passage for young boys. Around the age of twelve, they would be circumcised and then sent into the bush to recover and begin a season of training. Historically, this period included learning the duties of a warrior and protector of the community before eventually taking on the responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood. Whether one agrees with every aspect of those customs or not, they recognize something our culture has largely forgotten: boys do not simply become men by getting older. They must be intentionally formed.

In our own society, many boys reach twelve or thirteen years old and begin receiving powerful messages about masculinity, identity, sex, success, and purpose. They're ceaselessly bombarded from all sides by ideologues and institutions trying to gain ground on the battleground of the young man's formation. The shows they watch, the advertisements they see, the tech they use, and the schools they attend are all vying to influence adolescent males at the most vulnerable and impressionable time of their lives. The problem is not that our culture has stopped initiating boys into manhood; it is that the culture often initiates them into a counterfeit version of manhood that is detached from God and his design.

Christian fathers cannot excuse themselves by saying their church or tradition lacks a formal ceremony like *bar mitzvah*. Scripture places the responsibility squarely upon fathers to raise their children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). Fathers must intentionally lead their sons, teaching them God's Word, modeling repentance and courage, and preparing them to become husbands, fathers, and faithful Christians in their everyday life. If Christian fathers won't disciple their sons in biblical manhood, the world will gladly disciple them in something else. Jesus' own upbringing reminds us that godly parents do not leave maturity to chance—they cultivate it with intentionality, wisdom, and obedience to God.

JESUS IN THE TEMPLE

The custom of the day was for families to travel together in large pilgrim caravans as they made the journey back home from Jerusalem. Men, women, and children often traveled with extended family and friends, making the long trip safer and likely more enjoyable. We should not imagine Joseph and Mary as careless parents, nor should we picture a scene like *Home Alone*, where the McCallister family rushes to the airport and accidentally leaves Kevin behind. Luke has consistently portrayed Joseph and Mary as faithful and godly parents who carefully obeyed the Lord in every detail. It would have been perfectly reasonable for them to assume that twelve-year-old Jesus was somewhere among the relatives or neighbors traveling in the caravan.

Yet Luke tells us that **“Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem”** (v. 43). There is no sinful rebellion here on Jesus’ part, nor parental negligence on theirs. Rather, the family simply assumed Jesus was with the larger group. It was not until they had traveled an entire day’s journey that they began searching for him among their relatives and acquaintances. When they could not find him, they immediately turned back toward Jerusalem, anxiously looking for their son (vv. 44–45).

As a father myself, I can only imagine the fear that must have filled Joseph and Mary’s hearts. Their initial concern must have quickly turned into dread as the hours passed without finding him. Their anxiety likely spread throughout the caravan as family members and friends joined the search. This was a world without cell phones, GPS tracking, or any modern means of communication. Once they realized Jesus was missing, there was no easy way to coordinate or discover where he had gone.

I remember one Mother’s Day when our family was visiting a crowded outdoor market with thousands of people. I let go of my youngest son’s hand for only a brief moment while greeting some friends from church. We turned toward the restaurant where we planned to eat, and within seconds we realized he was gone. Those few minutes searching for him felt like an eternity. My heart raced, my mind imagined the worst, and panic quickly set in until a friend finally found him safe. My son was only six years old, and he was missing for perhaps five or ten minutes—not an entire day. Imagine the weight Joseph and Mary

carried as they retraced their steps toward Jerusalem, wondering where Jesus could be and praying they would find him unharmed.

“After three days they found him in the temple” (v. 46).

When Joseph and Mary finally found Jesus, he was at the men’s Bible study in the temple, **“sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions”** (v. 46). Luke does not linger over the details of the discussion, likely because his primary concern is the reunion between Jesus and his parents and the revelation of Jesus’ identity that follows. Still, Luke gives us an important glimpse into the scene by noting that **“all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers”** (v. 47). Apparently, Jesus was doing more than simply asking questions. The teachers were engaging him in conversation, and his responses revealed a wisdom and understanding far beyond what anyone would expect from a twelve-year-old boy.

Before returning to the conversation with Mary and Joseph, it is worth pausing to appreciate what Luke is showing us. Throughout this section, Luke has emphasized the genuine humanity of Jesus. This scene shows us Jesus really going up and developing in natural ways. As Paul later writes, Jesus “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:6–7), not by ceasing to be God but by humbly taking on human nature and all that accompanied it. Luke is reminding us that Jesus learned, grew, and matured as every child does.

This scene beautifully illustrates that reality. Jesus sits among the teachers with humility, listening carefully and asking thoughtful questions. Yet at the same time, his unique identity shines through, for his understanding astonishes the very scholars who had devoted their lives to studying the Scriptures. Here we see Jesus growing **“in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man”** (v. 52).

JESUS REUNITED WITH HIS PARENTS

The reunion between Jesus and his parents is a very interesting scene. After three agonizing days of searching, Joseph and Mary finally find their twelve-year-old son sitting peacefully among the teachers in the temple. One can almost feel the emotional collision

taking place in that moment. Relief floods over them because he is safe, yet that relief is immediately mixed with exhaustion, confusion, and frustration. As Luke puts it, **“when his parents saw him, they were astonished”** (v. 48). Their astonishment was not that they had found him, but where they found him and what he was doing—just casually hanging out at Bible study, somehow well-fed and well-rested after several good night’s sleep, as if nothing was wrong. Rather than being lost, frightened, or wandering the streets of Jerusalem, Jesus was calm and discussing Scriptures with Israel’s greatest teachers as though he belonged there. “Astonished” is a great word to describe how a parent would feel. I could imagine myself feeling far less Christian things in addition to astonishment.

Mary’s response, **“Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress”** (v. 48). Every parent who has ever lost sight of a child, even for a few moments, can sympathize with Mary’s words. There is no theological discourse here—only the heartfelt cry of a mother who has spent three days tirelessly searching for her son.

Jesus’ response, however, lifts the conversation to a higher plane: **“Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”** (v. 49). This is the first recorded saying of Jesus in all four Gospels. Even at twelve years old, Jesus possesses a clear awareness of his unique relationship with God the Father and his divine mission. The necessity expressed in the word “must” echoes throughout Luke’s Gospel as Jesus repeatedly speaks of the divine necessity of fulfilling his Father’s will (Lk. 4:43; 9:22; 24:26–27). His highest allegiance is already fixed upon the work the Father has sent Him to accomplish.

There’s a subtlety in this dialogue that can be easy to miss. Mary says, **“Your father and I have been searching for you,”** (v. 48) clearly referring to Joseph. Without dishonoring his earthly father, Jesus gently reminds his parents of his identity as the Christ when he says “my Father’s house,” affirming his unique identity as the Son of God. Even as a boy, Jesus understands that his life is ultimately governed by God the Father’s purposes.

Luke then adds a fun little detail: **“And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them”** (v. 50). For some reason, I chuckle every time I read that. I mean, I don’t expect them to fully understand it either. It is clear that Mary and Joseph still struggled to comprehend the full meaning of who Jesus was and what his mission would entail. God had revealed much, but there was still more they could not yet grasp.

Their time in the temple concludes with Jesus obeying his parents. **“And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them”** (v. 51). In this, we see one of the many ways Jesus fulfilled the Law on our behalf through his perfect obedience. Every act of righteousness, including his faithful submission to his parents, was part of the sinless life Jesus lived on our behalf. Through faith in Christ, his perfect righteousness is credited to every believer. This also happens to be one clear example of an area in which all of us have fallen short in our obedience to our parents. We should see even this act of righteousness as having been credited to our account!

Lastly, Luke tells us once again that **“his mother treasured up all these things in her heart”** (v. 51). Mary may not have understood everything, but she continued to store these moments away, pondering them carefully as God’s redemptive plan slowly unfolded before her eyes. Faith does not always understand immediately, but it continues to trust while it waits for understanding. As Paul exhorted Timothy, “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything” (2 Tim. 2:7). Like Mary, we ought to treasure up these things in our heart, trusting that in God’s perfect timing he will grant us understanding and clarity.

QUESTIONS

Why is it significant that Jesus is found in the temple among the teachers at twelve years old?

What does Jesus' statement, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" reveal about his identity and mission?

How does this passage show both the humanity and deity of Jesus at the same time?

What does Jesus' return to Nazareth in obedience reveal to us?

CHAPTER 11

LUKE 3:1-14

John the Baptist Pt. 1

While God's people may not have gotten the Messiah that they expected in Jesus, it would be inaccurate to suggest that they weren't well prepared for his arrival. Before Jesus began his public ministry, the ministry of John the Baptist preceded him, just as the prophets had foretold. In fact, the last prophet before God's long silence, Malachi, closed his book by announcing that God would send a messenger to prepare the way before the coming of the Lord (Mal. 3:1; 4:5–6). After four hundred years without an oracle, John the Baptist appears as that long-awaited voice crying out in the wilderness, preparing Israel for the appearance of their Savior.

Luke sets John's ministry in **“the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar”** (v. 1). He then lists the political and religious leaders who governed the land during that time: Tiberius Caesar ruled the Roman Empire; Pontius Pilate served as governor of Judea; Herod Antipas ruled Galilee; his brother Philip governed the regions of Iturea and Trachonitis; Lysanias ruled Abilene; and Annas and Caiaphas served as the high priests (vv. 1–2). It should be noted that this accuracy is confirmed by historical records outside the Bible. The only name whose precise identity is debated is that of Lysanias, largely because the name was shared by multiple rulers in antiquity. The others are well-attested historical figures. The ministry of John and the coming of Jesus unfolded in a real place, under real rulers, at a verifiable and specific moment in human history.

Yet Luke is doing more than simply establishing historical reliability. By naming these rulers, he also paints the political and spiritual landscape into which John and Jesus entered. The land was governed by a mixture of pagan emperors, corrupt politicians, coercive military power, and a priesthood that had become deeply entangled with political power. This was not a golden age of righteousness but a dark and troubled period in Israel's history. As González observes, “These were not happy circumstances, for all whom Luke mentions were representatives of

foreign dominion” (González 2010, 48). It is into this mire of chaos and corruption that God sends his prophet and, soon after, his Messiah.

JOHN’S MINISTRY

It was at this time that **“the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness”** (v. 2). Luke intentionally uses the language of the Old Testament prophets. This is not only the beginning of John’s preaching ministry; it is a prophetic commissioning. Just like God who spoke through Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the other prophets, he is now speaking to and through John. As Malachi foretold, John would come in the spirit and power of Elijah, preparing the way for the coming of the Lord (Mal. 3:1; 4:5–6). Like Elijah before him, John would call God’s people to repentance.

Luke further reinforces this prophetic identity by quoting Isaiah 40:3–5 in verses 4–6: **“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”** In Isaiah’s original context, these words announced God’s coming to deliver his people from exile. Luke now reveals that they also were written concerning John the Baptist, declaring that the long-awaited return of God to his people is taking place in the person of Jesus Christ. The imagery of valleys being filled, mountains made low, crooked places made straight, and rough places made smooth is primarily about preparing hearts. John’s preaching would expose sin, humble the self-righteous, and call the broken to repentance so that they would be ready to receive their Messiah. The climax of Isaiah’s prophecy is that **“all flesh shall see the salvation of God”** (v. 6), reminding us that the ministry of John and the coming of Jesus are not only for Israel alone but for the salvation of the nations. John is seen as the final Old Testament prophet, standing between the old covenant and the new, announcing the arrival of Jesus Christ.

PROPHETIC PREACHING

Depending on your church background, denominational affiliation, and theological leanings, the term *prophetic preaching* may mean different things to you. Many people conflate the term “prophecy” with “premonition,” and assume that to prophesy is solely to receive

and transmit such visions of the future. But the prophets of the Bible were not fortune-tellers for the people of Israel. While the Old Testament prophets certainly did foretell future events, that was not the primary focus of their ministry, nor was the foretelling of events the primary purpose of their message. These prophets were calling God's people to repentance and covenant faithfulness by bringing the Word of God to bear upon their lives. This is precisely why Luke tells us that the word of God came to John back in verse two. John was the latest in a long line of the prophets called to bring God's Word to bear upon those who heard his preaching.

The type of ministry John receives requires a man who fears God more than he fears people. The prophet cannot soften the truth to gain popularity or avoid conflict. His task is not to entertain, or offer personal opinions, but to declare the Word of the Lord and call for a response of repentance and obedience. John comes announcing that the kingdom of heaven is near and that God's people must prepare their hearts to receive their king.

Prophetic preaching ministry has always been about bringing God's Word to bear upon God's people and calling them to obey whatever the Lord has spoken. While no one today possesses the unique prophetic office of John the Baptist or Elijah, the New Testament teaches that the church continues to benefit from prophetic gifts and prophetic preaching (1 Cor. 12:10; 14:1–5). Most commonly, this ministry comes as men faithfully proclaim the already-revealed Word of God. The preacher opens the Scriptures, explains what God has said, and presses that truth upon the consciences of God's people with the expectation that they will respond in obedient faith.

Like John's ministry, those whom God particularly gifts and calls in this way often possess unusual clarity in identifying compromise, sin, and error. They are burdened for holiness, jealous for God's glory, and unwilling to sacrifice biblical truth for the approval of others. Such ministries are rarely celebrated by the world. John the Baptist's certainly was not. As Luke's Gospel unfolds, we will see him ultimately lose his life because of his commitment to this kind of God-given ministry. That has often been the cost of prophetic preaching throughout

redemptive history. The prophets were seldom applauded by their generation, but they were faithful to the God who sent them.

PREACHING REPENTANCE

Luke tells us that John **“went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”** (v. 3). “This does not mean that baptism brings forgiveness of sins. In point of fact, John’s baptism followed each person’s repentance and was a sign of it” (R Kent Hughes 2015, 110). As John preached, he called his hearers to repent of their sins and receive the forgiveness that God graciously grants to those who turn to him in faith. As Scripture declares, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9). “Thus, the proper view of John’s ministry is to see him full of the Spirit and preaching with such effect that multitudes visibly fell under conviction, resulting in many repenting of their sins and asking for John’s baptism” (R Kent Hughes 2015, 111).

John’s message was remarkably simple: *repent*. In many ways, this emphasis has been lost in many modern pulpits. Ours is an age that prefers the language of so-called “tolerance” over that of repentance, and affirmation over transformation. John preached neither tolerance nor affirmation. He called people to turn from their rebellion and return to God.

Repentance is often misunderstood. It is not feeling guilty, nor is it penance—attempting to punish ourselves or earn God’s favor through religious acts. The biblical idea of repentance means a change of heart and mind that results in a change of direction. It is turning away from sin and turning toward God in faith and obedience. It is the prodigal son leaving the pigpen and returning to his father. It is abandoning self-rule and joyfully submitting to the lordship of God. Repentance is not simply saying, “I’m sorry”; it is saying, “Lord, I was wrong, and by your grace I will follow you.”

Why was such preaching necessary before the arrival of Jesus? Because the Messiah was coming, and his people needed to prepare their hearts to receive him. For if they didn’t they would perish apart from his

saving grace. John's ministry functioned like a herald traveling ahead of a king, calling the citizens to make ready for his arrival. Repentance prepared the people to recognize their need for the Messiah, for only those who know they are sinners rejoice at the arrival of a Savior.

In this sense, faithful preaching today carries a ministry remarkably similar to John's. While no preacher is another John the Baptist, yet every faithful herald of God's Word prepares people for the return of Christ by proclaiming the same message: repent and believe in Jesus. John prepared a people for Christ's first coming; the church now proclaims the gospel in preparation for his second. The message has not changed. The Christ is returning. Therefore, people must turn from sin, trust in Jesus, and live in joyful readiness for the day when faith becomes sight.

PROPHETIC EDGE

While John was certainly not trying to win a popularity contest among his contemporaries, he did draw crowds. This is often the case when God raises up someone to be his mouthpiece, cutting through the cultural noise to speak clearly to his people. John was in no way trying to be a provocateur, but his ministry did have a sharp edge to it. Faithful preaching often does.

We see this immediately in our text. Rather than flattering the crowds with soft sermons designed to grow his ministry, John greets them with the startling words, **"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"** (v. 7). His language is intentionally confrontational, but not for the sake of clicks and likes. John is speaking directly to the motives of many who had come to hear him. They wanted the benefits of escaping judgment without the burden of genuine repentance.

By calling them a "brood of vipers," John is not seeking to insult them. He is drawing on the biblical imagery of the serpent from Genesis 3. Throughout redemptive history there have been two spiritual seeds—the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. Some who came to John would truly repent, believe, and follow the coming Messiah. Others, hardened by unbelief, would

ultimately oppose Christ and His kingdom. John's words expose the spiritual reality beneath outward religious appearances.

FRUIT OF REPENTANCE

Like the prophets before him, John is revealing the true condition of the human heart. Faithful preaching has always cut through superficial noise and applied God's Word where it is needed most. Sometimes that means healing the brokenhearted; other times it means piercing the conscience, as happened at Pentecost when the hearers "were cut to the heart" and cried out, "Brothers, what shall we do?" It is ultimately God himself who accomplishes this work through his Word and his Spirit, using faithful preaching.

The modern church is often tempted to believe that effectiveness is measured by popularity and that faithfulness means avoiding offense. John would have rejected such thinking entirely. We should understand that a physician who never diagnoses disease cannot heal the patient. Likewise, a preacher who never confronts sin cannot faithfully proclaim the gospel. Before people can rejoice in God's grace, they must first recognize their need for it. Before they run to the Savior, they must be awakened to the danger of their sin.

John's seemingly harsh words are therefore not the absence of love but the expression of it. He warns of the coming wrath because he longs for people to flee from it. Yet repentance, in John's mind, is never an emotional response of "sorry." It is a transformed life. That is why he immediately follows his rebuke with the command, **"Bear fruits in keeping with repentance"** (v. 8). Genuine repentance always produces visible change. The inward turning of the heart toward God inevitably reveals itself in the outward conduct of one's life. Repentance is not simply confessed with the lips; it is demonstrated by the fruit that follows.

John's preaching produced exactly the response faithful preaching ought to produce. Convicted by his message, the crowds begin asking, **"What then shall we do?"** (v. 10). This is the question that flows from a repentant heart. Repentance is never content to acknowledge sin; it longs to know how life should now be lived differently. Not in order

to earn God's love, but because it has already been received. Genuine conviction of sin always produces a desire for practical obedience.

John does not tell the crowds to retreat into the wilderness, or join him in a monastery. Instead, he calls them to simple acts of everyday faithfulness. **“Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise”** (v. 11). Repentance produces generosity where selfishness once ruled. It changes the way we view our possessions, reminding us that everything we have is ultimately a gift from God to be stewarded for the glory of God and the good of others.

Then, even despised tax collectors come asking, **“Teacher, what shall we do?”** (v. 12). These men were notorious for their dishonesty, often enriching themselves by collecting more than Rome required and pocketing the surplus. Yet John does not tell them to abandon their profession altogether. Instead, he commands them, **“Collect no more than you are authorized to do”** (v. 13). Repentance transforms integrity even in the workplace. The evidence of a changed heart is seen in honest business practices, righteous dealings, and refusing to profit from the exploitation of others.

The soldiers ask the same question, and John's answer is equally practical: **“Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages”** (v. 14). Those entrusted with authority are not to abuse their power for personal gain. Once again, we see repentance leads to life change.

Notice what John does not say. He does not call these people to earn God's favor by good works. Rather, he calls them to demonstrate that their hearts have truly changed. A tree can appear totally healthy, but it's not until it produces its fruit that we can be certain whether it's a good tree or a bad one. The fruit doesn't make the tree good; it reveals the good tree. In the same way, good works do not produce repentance, but true repentance inevitably produces good works. The changed life is the visible evidence of an inward transformation wrought by the grace of God.

This remains one of the clearest tests of genuine conversion today. The gospel does not only alter what we believe; it changes how we live. A repentant husband loves his wife differently. A repentant wife honors her husband differently. Parents raise their children differently. Employees work differently. Employers lead differently. Citizens treat their neighbors differently. The grace that forgives sinners is also the grace that transforms them. Wherever true repentance exists, new fruit will eventually appear.

QUESTIONS

Why is John’s message of repentance the necessary preparation for the coming of Christ?

Why does John confront the crowds so directly instead of offering a softer message? How do you think this message would be received today?

What does true repentance look like according to John’s instructions to the crowds?

What does this passage teach us about the evidence of a truly changed heart?

CHAPTER 12

LUKE 3:15-22

John the Baptist Pt. 2

There's an undeniable "come and see" quality to John's ministry that was as effective in drawing crowds in his day as it is in ours. People flocked in huge numbers to hear his preaching, and many came to him under deep conviction of sin. But John was not trying to draw crowds for the sake of building a name for himself. He had no issue with the platform God gave him. No matter how large it got, John's ministry always pointed to Jesus and never served his own ego. He made it clear that Jesus was the important one, desiring for himself to fall into obscurity (Jn 3:30). Even so, John attracted followers in droves. The crowds came because God was at work through the faithful proclamation of His Word. John's goal was never popularity with the people, but the repentance of the people. Every modern church ministry should have the same focus.

I want to make a hard distinction between a ministry like that of John the Baptist's and what we've seen in the "seeker-sensitive" movement of our time. We live in a fame-hungry culture, in a time where fame comes cheaper and easier than it ever has before. Instant notoriety and influence is an enticing thing for anyone. Pastors are no exception, and I see so many fall into the pursuit of influencer status, virality, and celebrity. I have no desire here to critique churches for having large congregations or pastors for having recognizable names. John's ministry drew massive crowds, Jesus ministered to thousands, and Peter preached one sermon at Pentecost through which about three thousand people were saved. But I do want to call out the men, especially the young men, who are pursuing fame over faithfulness. Too many aspiring pastors look at large ministries and dream of influence rather than obedience, and the fact of the matter is, obedience isn't often celebrated. It doesn't make for good clickbait, it doesn't give your followers a dopamine bump, it doesn't sell out conferences or buy you a Rolex. In contrast, John's ministry resembled Elijah's. Though he experienced moments of enormous public impact, much of his life was spent in hardship, opposition, and danger. To accept the calling

of an Old Testament prophet often meant accepting that your life would be threatened, and that is exactly what happened to John.

Large ministries that are truly faithful to Jesus and his Word should be celebrated, but if it comes down to choosing between obedience to God or friendship with the world (as it so often does), I want to implore and encourage the young men to choose obedience. Even if it comes at great personal cost, what is gained in Christ is of far surpassing worth. With all of that said, I do believe it is right for preachers to desire great fruitfulness. Jesus said that his Father is glorified when we bear much fruit (Jn. 15:8), and there is nothing wrong with longing for great gospel impact. But let your model be the faithful prophets and preachers of Scripture, especially John the Baptist. After all, Jesus himself declared that among those born of women, there had arisen no one greater than John (Matt. 11:11). John sought neither applause nor influence for himself; he simply pointed people to Christ. That is the kind of ministry worth aspiring to.

FRUITFUL MINISTRY

The fruitfulness of John's ministry is impossible to ignore. Luke tells us, **"...the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ"**

(v. 15). Such was the power and effectiveness of his preaching that many wondered if John was himself the long-awaited Messiah.

Crowds like those you might find at a tent revival gathered around him, lives were being transformed, and anticipation filled the nation. Yet John's response reveals the heart of a faithful preacher. Rather than embracing the speculation or building his own reputation, he immediately redirected every eye away from himself and toward Jesus Christ.

John answered them all, saying, **"I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming"** (v. 16). Every faithful preacher understands that his task is not to gather disciples for himself but to point people to Christ. I want to be clear, popularity is not the issue. Where you point people is. John's popularity never became his identity because he understood his calling. The greatest preachers are not those who make much of themselves but those who make much of Jesus.

John then contrasts his own ministry with Christ's. His baptism was a sign of repentance, but Jesus **"will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire"** (v. 16). "It seems best to see John as thinking of positive and negative aspects of Messiah's message. Those who accept him will be purified by fire (cf. Mal. 3:1 ff.) and strengthened by the Holy Spirit" (Morris 2008, 115). John's work could call people to repentance, but only Jesus could regenerate the heart by the Holy Spirit. John's preaching could expose sin, but only Christ could forgive it. John's ministry prepared the way; Christ's ministry accomplished salvation.

Verse 17 continues to develop the theme of judgment with strong imagery: **"His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."** John reminds the crowds that the coming of Christ brings both salvation and judgment. John's ministry therefore carried both an invitation and a warning. And notice that this isn't considered by Luke to be hateful speech, but good news. Right after this clear expression of divine judgment, he says, **"with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people"** (v. 18). It seems that this idea has not yet captured the imagination of the modern church.

The same pattern remains true in faithful preaching today. God still uses the proclamation of His Word to prepare hearts for Christ. Faithful preaching exalts Jesus and not the preacher; it calls sinners to repentance, and points people to the only one who can save them. Such ministry may or may not produce fame, but by God's grace it always produces fruit. Whenever Christ is faithfully proclaimed, the Holy Spirit convicts sinners, strengthens believers, and builds his church.

The Apostle Paul understood that life itself means opportunity for fruitful ministry. Imprisoned and uncertain whether he would live or die, he writes, "If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me" (Phil. 1:22). Paul measured his life by whether Christ was being made known through him. This same principle is seen in the ministry of John the Baptist. Every Christian should adopt this perspective. As long as God grants us breath, he has given us work to do. Whether through preaching, discipling our children, serving our neighbors,

evangelizing the lost, or quietly laboring in faithfulness where he has placed us, our lives are meant to bear fruit for the glory of God.

FEARLESS PREACHING

John was a fearless preacher, and his sermons were not reserved only for the common people who came to hear him. If we remember the prophecy fulfilled in John's ministry, his message was intended to prepare all people for the coming of the Messiah (Lk. 3:6), and his rebukes extended even to Roman rulers. Luke tells us that John rebuked **"Herod the tetrarch,"** because he married **"Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done"** (v. 19). John was unwilling to remain silent in the face of public sin, even when it involved the Roman-appointed ruler of Galilee. This is John's message: All need to turn from their sin and turn to Christ! But rather than repent, Herod **"locked up John in prison"** (v. 20), and, as the Gospels later reveal, he would eventually have John beheaded (Matt. 14 and Mk. 6).

The church today stands in desperate need of this kind of fearless preaching. John ministered in the spirit and power of Elijah, refusing to compromise God's Word for the approval of men. He feared God more than kings, and valued faithfulness to his calling more than popularity or even his own life and wellbeing. Such courage has always marked the faithful servants of God. The apostles declared, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29), and Paul charged Timothy to "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2). Every generation is tempted to soften the truth of God's Word in order to gain cultural acceptance, but the church does not need more flattering voices. It needs more faithful Bible preachers who love Jesus enough to preach faithfully. We need preachers who love people enough to warn them of sin and point them to Christ, whatever the personal cost may be.

Luke is not writing in strict chronological order at this point. Instead, he concludes the account of John's ministry before turning his full attention to the public ministry of Jesus Christ. In doing so, Luke reminds his readers that faithful ministry often comes at a great cost. The prophet who prepared the way for Jesus would suffer because of his unwavering commitment to the message he proclaimed.

JESUS' BAPTISM

Luke moves straight into Jesus' baptism without even mentioning John the Baptist by name. It is almost as if Luke himself, through his writing, is expressing the very sentiment John proclaimed in reference to Jesus: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn. 3:30). John's ministry has faithfully prepared the way, but now the spotlight shifts entirely to Christ.

Unlike the other Gospel writers, Luke does not dwell on the interaction between John and Jesus before the baptism. He simply gives us the highlights of the event: **"Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased'"** (v. 21–22). In just two verses, Luke records one of the most significant moments in the Bible, when the Father speaks, the Son is baptized, and the Holy Spirit descends; the entire Trinity is tangibly present.

One of the great questions surrounding Jesus' baptism is why the sinless Son of God would submit to a baptism of repentance. He didn't have anything to repent of, so his baptism couldn't be pointing to his repentance. John himself struggled with the idea, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matt. 3:14). Jesus had no sins to confess, no guilt to wash away, and no need to repent. Why then would He stand in line with tax collectors, prostitutes, soldiers, and religious hypocrites?

As Leon Morris observes, "Since Luke depicts Jesus as without sin it is not obvious why he should have undergone this baptism. But Jesus saw sinners flocking to John's baptism. Clearly he decided to take his place with them. At the outset of his ministry he publicly identified with the sinners he came to save" (Morris 2008, 118). As the Apostle Paul would later write, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). Likewise, the author of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is able to sympathize with our weaknesses because he truly shared in our humanity, yet "without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

His baptism, therefore, anticipates the entire gospel. The one who had no sin identifies himself with sinners so that sinners might one day be identified with him. Jesus enters the waters of repentance not because he needs forgiveness, but because we do. He goes to stand in our place so that we might one day stand in his—fully accepted and beloved before the Father.

All four Gospels note that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus “like a dove,” showing that Jesus is anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit for his ministry. It is important to observe that Luke does not say the Holy Spirit was a dove, but that he descended in bodily form, like a dove. At the time of Jesus’ baptism, the dove itself was not a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Throughout the Bible the Holy Spirit is associated with many different images: wind that cannot be controlled (Jn. 3:8), fire that purifies (Acts 2:3), living water that satisfies (Jn. 7:38–39), oil that anoints (1 Sam. 16:13), and breath that gives life (Ezek. 37:9–10). Here, however, the Spirit comes like a dove, resting upon Jesus as the Father publicly identifies him as his beloved Son. Yet because of Christ’s baptism, the dove became one of the enduring symbols of the Holy Spirit in Christianity.

Jesus’ baptism marks the inauguration of his public ministry. Everything has been set in motion for the ministry that will ultimately lead to the cross and the empty tomb. From this point forward, Luke’s Gospel shifts its attention almost exclusively to the person and work of Jesus Christ. In the next chapter of this volume we will briefly trace the genealogy of Jesus and note the significance found in it. And in the next volume of this commentary series, we will step into the public ministry of Jesus Christ, beginning with his temptation in the wilderness.

QUESTIONS

What does John's contrast between his baptism with water and Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit teach us?

Why is it significant that Jesus is baptized even though he has no sin? What does that reveal about his mission?

What does the Father's voice from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" teach us about Jesus' identity and the Father's approval?

Discuss what it would look like for you to live your life for God's approval instead of the world's approval.

CHAPTER 13

LUKE 3:23-38

The Genealogy of Jesus Christ

Preaching through the genealogies in the Bible can be difficult. I have preached through several of them while working verse-by-verse through Genesis, Nehemiah, and now Luke. Many Christians are tempted to skim over long lists of names, assuming they have little practical value for the life of faith. I always remind Christians, these are our kinsmen through faith in Jesus. I think it changes one's perspective when we think of them like that. In addition, we who hold to the inerrancy of Scripture believe the Holy Spirit did not waste a single word by including them. Genealogies remind us that God works through people just like us through the course of history to accomplish his redemptive purposes.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCES

Only Matthew and Luke include genealogies in their Gospels, and because they differ in several places, they have received careful scrutiny throughout church history. I believe it would be irresponsible of me to simply pass over these differences without addressing them. Thoughtful readers naturally ask why the genealogies are not identical to one another and wonder how they should be understood together. While no single explanation gives way to universal agreement, the various proposals demonstrate that the two accounts are actually far from contradictory. Rather, both Matthew and Luke organize their genealogies to emphasize a distinct theological purpose.

The genealogies in Matthew and Luke differ particularly in the generations between David and Jesus. Most notably, Matthew names Joseph's father as Jacob (Matt. 1:16), while Luke identifies "**Joseph, the son of Heli**" (v. 23). The different names given for Joseph's father have generated considerable discussion. Various solutions have been suggested over the centuries. Some propose that Joseph was legally descended through one man while biologically descended through another because of remarriage, adoption, or levirate marriage customs (Deut. 25:5-10). Others suggest that Heli may have been

Mary's father, making Joseph his legal heir through marriage. This would be consistent with Old Testament precedents concerning inheritance through daughters (Num. 27:1–11; 1 Chron. 2:34–35; Ezra 2:61; Neh. 7:63). While none of these proposals can be proven with certainty, each represents a serious attempt to harmonize the biblical record while affirming the historical reliability of both genealogies.

Although both Matthew and Luke record the genealogy of Jesus, they do so with different theological emphases. Matthew writes primarily with a Jewish audience in mind. He begins with Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, presenting Jesus as Israel's promised Messiah. Luke, however, traces the family line all the way back to Adam, reminding us that Jesus came for the entire human race. I believe one of the reasons for this is because he is writing to Theophilus, a Gentile working for the Roman government. By extending the genealogy all the way back to humanity's first father, Luke again emphasizes the universal scope of Christ's saving mission as he has several times already in his Gospel, and carries on into his second letter, which we know as the book of Acts (Acts 17:26).

There is a view that suggests that Luke is tracing Jesus' biological genealogy through the line of his mother, Mary, and that Matthew preserves Joseph's genealogy. Although this proposal has a long history, it is not widely embraced by contemporary scholarship. Among the commentators I've studied, even those who offer this explanation do so reluctantly. The reason being is that Luke explicitly identifies Joseph in the genealogy, and the text itself never mentions Mary in a way that naturally suggests the lineage belongs to her. For that reason, most interpreters look elsewhere for an explanation of the differences between the two Gospel accounts.

Another discrepancy in the two genealogies is that Matthew traces the line through David's son Solomon, whereas Luke traces it through **"Nathan, the son of David"** (v. 31). Matthew appears interested in the royal succession through king David's son Solomon, demonstrating Jesus' legal claim to David's throne. Luke, by contrast, follows the family line through Nathan, another son of David, but nonetheless emphasizes Jesus' genuine descent

from David's household. Seeing that both Solomon and Nathan were sons of David through Bathsheba, the differences between the genealogies do not undermine Jesus' Davidic ancestry.

Whatever solution one adopts to harmonize the differences between Matthew and Luke, both genealogies accomplish the same central purpose: they establish Jesus as the promised Son of David and the long-awaited Messiah. And Luke further guards the doctrine of the virgin birth by carefully stating that Jesus was **“the son (as was supposed) of Joseph,”** (v. 23). reminding his readers that Joseph was his legal father, while his true conception was by the Holy Spirit. Thus, Jesus stands as both the rightful heir to David's throne and the sinless Son of God who came to save the world.

SON OF ADAM, SON OF GOD

Luke presents Jesus under four significant titles throughout this genealogy: **the Son of Abraham, the Son of David, the Son of Adam, and the Son of God.** As the **Son of Abraham**, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's covenant promise that through Abraham's offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3; 22:18; Gal. 3:16). As the **Son of David**, Jesus is the promised King whose throne will endure forever, fulfilling God's covenant with David (2 Sam. 7:12–16; Lk.1:32–33).

I would like to focus our attention on the two final titles at the conclusion of the genealogy: Jesus is **“the son of Adam, and the son of God.”** (v. 38). This connection is especially significant when read in light of the preceding passage. At Jesus' baptism, the Father declares from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Lk. 3:22). Immediately afterward, Luke traces Jesus' lineage back through history until it reaches “Adam, the son of God.” Luke invites his readers to compare the first son of God, Adam, with the true and eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ.

We have already noted that Luke writes to Theophilus with a concern that extends beyond ethnic Israel. Unlike Matthew, who begins with Abraham, Luke intentionally traces Jesus' ancestry all the way back to Adam, the father of the entire human race. Every nation, tribe, language, and people group ultimately traces its ancestry

back to Adam, and therefore every person stands in need of the salvation that Christ alone provides. By extending the genealogy to the very beginning of humanity, Luke emphasizes that Jesus is not merely the Messiah of Israel but the Savior of the world.

This genealogy also prepares the reader for one of the great theological themes developed throughout the New Testament: Jesus Christ as the Second Adam. While Luke never explicitly uses that title, his decision to trace Jesus' lineage to Adam invites the comparison. Luke was a close companion of the Apostle Paul during many of his missionary journeys (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16), and Paul repeatedly contrasts Adam and Christ as the two representative heads of humanity.

Paul writes, “The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45). He continues, “The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven” (1 Cor. 15:47). Likewise, he describes Adam as “a pattern of the one who was to come” (Rom. 5:14). The first Adam stood as the covenant representative of humanity, and through his disobedience, sin, condemnation, and death entered the world (Rom. 5:12). Every son and daughter of Adam inherits that fallen condition and stands under the curse of sin.

Jesus comes as the last Adam to accomplish what the first Adam failed to do. Where Adam disobeyed when tempted by Satan in a garden, Christ obeyed in a wilderness when tempted by Satan. Where Adam listened to the voice of the serpent, Jesus perfectly submitted himself to the will of God perfectly. Adam's disobedience brought condemnation and death, but Christ's obedience brings righteousness, justification, and salvation to all who believe (Rom. 5:18–19). “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:22).

This theme becomes even more important in Luke's narrative because, immediately after tracing Jesus' lineage back to Adam, Luke records Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. I believe the presentation of these two events in immediate succession is very intentional. Jesus begins his ministry where Adam failed. As we will see, the second Adam withstands temptation and begins the work of reclaiming what was lost.

Luke's genealogy, therefore, is doing far more than preserving family history. It is proclaiming the gospel. By tracing Jesus back to Adam, Luke announces that a new Head of humanity has arrived. All who remain in Adam inherit sin, guilt, and death. All who are united to Christ by faith receive righteousness, forgiveness, and eternal life. The story of redemption is ultimately the story of two men: Adam, whose disobedience brought the curse upon humanity, and Jesus Christ, the Second Adam, whose perfect obedience secures salvation and brings blessing to the nations.

QUESTIONS

What does this genealogy reveal about Jesus' connection to both Israel's story and the entire human race?

What does this passage teach us about the unity of Scripture in presenting one redemptive story through many generations?

What does this genealogy teach us about God's faithfulness to fulfill promises across centuries of time?

What does Romans 5:18–19 and 1 Corinthians 15:22 add to Luke's portrait of Jesus as the “son Adam, son of God”?

APPENDIX

Bibliography and Further Reading

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