

Luke 1 (Part 1): 1-25 • Intro and Prophecies of the Messenger

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By way of just a very brief introduction, the Gospel that we call Luke was written by a man who we know to be a medical doctor. Doctors weren't like they are today. Many doctors back in those days were slaves. In fact, doctors were owned by slave owners, masters, and it was mostly the wealthy who could afford to keep their own physician.

And we don't know what Luke's particular situation was. It's certainly, not all of them were slaves, but some were. But Luke was a man who traveled extensively with the apostle Paul and it was based on those travels that he also penned the Book of Acts. And in both accounts, he writes to a man named Theophilus.

We don't really know anything about Theophilus, but from the preface to both Luke and Acts, it is clear that Luke wanted to reassure Theophilus about the things that he'd been taught related to Jesus, related to the church, related to the work of the Holy Spirit, so that he would be confident about those things.

He begins here by writing in verse 1, *“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.” (ESV)*

Right away, Luke admits that he's not an eyewitness. He talks about those who were eyewitnesses, but he's telling you here that he is not. But yet, he set out to investigate all these things, which the eyewitnesses knew and understood, so that he might present his findings here. And obviously Luke rubs shoulders with a lot of the people who were eyewitnesses of the events that took place in the life and ministry of Jesus, and he had a wonderful opportunity to compile that information.

The name Theophilus by the way means, one who loves God. And that has led some people to wonder if maybe Theophilus wasn't a real person, but in fact,

Luke was using that name to describe all believers. However, you'll notice that he doesn't just call him Theophilus, he calls him, "*most excellent Theophilus.*" And that's what tells us that this is a real person because that was a title that was given many times to Roman government officials. Like, for example, in the Book of Acts, the procurator of Judea is referred to as, most excellent, and so forth. And often in Graeco-Roman literature, we find that term used quite often to describe government officials. Since Theophilus was a very common name back in those days, we assume that this was a genuine individual.

And then finally you notice that Luke begins by dating his account. Look at verse 5 as we keep reading on. He says, "*In the days of Herod, king of Judea,...*" And what you just read is a date. That's the way they dated things back then when they wrote events, when they wrote about things, historical accounts, made records, they would date it by the rule and the reign of whoever happened to be reigning and serving in that time. And Luke does that throughout his Gospel.

In fact, Luke does it more than any other Gospel writer, any other biblical writer. Luke is in fact, very careful about dating his work. And there's one particular example where he just like goes way overboard. It's a few chapters ahead, so I'll put it on the screen for you. From Luke chapter 3 he says,

Luke 3:1-2 (ESV)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, (that's 1) Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, (that's 2) and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, (that's 3) and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, (and then he goes on to say) the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

I mean that's absolutely amazing. There are no fewer than 6 different datings that Luke gives as he begins to talk about what he's going to talk about in that passage. And you and I look at that and we think, wow that's pretty cool. But over the years that was reason for a lot of people to criticize and to question Luke and his dating ability and his historical accuracy in the writings that he presented to us.

And people did criticize Luke, and they criticized him roundly, at least for a while. And then archaeology began to just go nuts around the world and we started digging up things that gave proof after proof after proof that Luke was historically faithful to the point where some people refer today to Luke as the greatest historian ever in history. So accuracy, yes.

He goes on to write here again in verse 5, *“In the days of Herod, king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.”*

The first thing that Luke does is he presents the first two people that we're going to focus on here in his account. And they are Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth who are both descendants of the brother of Moses, Aaron, who was the very first high priest of Israel.

And furthermore, we read, and this is very important in verse 6, he says, *“And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.”* Alright, stop there for just a moment.

It's very important what Luke is doing right now in his communication because before telling you and I that Zachariah and Elizabeth were childless, before he gets to that, he makes the point, and very careful point of telling you and I that they were both blameless before the Lord. And that's very important and it was very purposeful on his part.

Because you see, the Jews considered anyone who was childless to be under the disfavor of God. It was considered a command of every Jewish couple to obey the Lord when they became married and in the command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. And therefore it was impossible for a Jewish mind to think of why someone would be kept from fulfilling that command unless there was something in their life that went wrong, very wrong, and for which they are now being punished.

Luke makes it known here in this situation, that it was not because of God's disfavor. He's very clear about the fact here that these two were blameless before the Lord. That doesn't mean perfect. Blameless is a different word. And he is telling you and I that they are not under the disfavor of the Lord. Instead, he's going to communicate to you and I through this story that this was in fact God's plan. And that's sometimes hard for you and I to understand but let's read how this plan unfolds.

Verse 8. *“Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.”* Stop there, please, for a moment. Just a couple of quick things I want to bring out.

First of all, every descendant of Aaron, every male descendant of Aaron was automatically considered a priest. But of course, that meant for all intents and purposes, there were really too many priests for the limited functions that went on around the temple. And so what the priests did is they divided into 24 groups, and then twice a year for 1 week, each group would be scheduled to be in the temple to perform whatever functions were necessary, like burning incense and so forth.

Luke refers to this time that Zachariah is serving as the hour of incense, which by the way, took place twice a day. It was in the morning and in the evening. Only Zechariah would have been allowed in there because the altar of incense was in that area referred to as, the holy place, not the most holy place, but the outer holy place where he would go to perform this particular function. All the other worshippers were outside and the Bible says that they were praying while Zechariah was inside offering this incense.

And you'll remember that prayer and incense go together in the Word of God. Incense is a picture of our prayers rising before the Lord. Zechariah is in the holy place. He's burning incense, fulfilling his function, his priestly role on that occasion.

And look with me in verse 11 as it goes on. *“And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.”* I don't doubt it.

Verse 13, *“But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him (meaning the Messiah) 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.””* All right, stop there for just a moment.

I want you to notice that in the last verse that the angel told Zechariah that his son would go before the Lord or go before the Messiah, literally, in the spirit and power of Elijah. People have really struggled to figure out what that means. But it doesn't mean that John the Baptist was Elijah.

John himself was asked, are you Elijah? And he said, I am not. And what it meant is just what the angel said. John would minister in the spirit and power of Elijah. And it is not a specific reference to Elijah. John is his own person. But this is particularly interesting hearing this, because John's coming was prophesied in Scripture. And there is a connection to Elijah even in the Old Testament prophecies.

I want to show you a couple of prophecies regarding John's coming, and the first is in Isaiah. Up on the screen for you. Notice this, it says,

Isaiah 40:3 (ESV)

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

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Now, how do we know that this was a reference to John the Baptist? Well, John quoted it when he would be asked, who are you? Are you Elijah? No. Are you the prophet? No. Well then, who are you? I am the voice, crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord, and so forth. So John used this passage of himself.

But then there's also a couple of amazing passages in the Book of Malachi related to John the Baptist. I'll put these up here. Malachi 3:1 says,

Malachi 3:1 (ESV)

"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts."

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And then, in keeping with what the angel said to Zechariah about John ministering in the spirit and power of Elijah, if you go on to Malachi chapter 4, you see that it says,

Malachi 4:5-6 (ESV)

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

This is an amazing prophecy. And you might say, well, wait a minute, pastor Paul, it says right here in this passage that God's going to send Elijah the prophet. And yet John said he was not Elijah the prophet.

Well, John was a partial fulfillment of this particular prophetic passage because you'll notice it says, *“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome (or literally terrible) day of the LORD comes.”*

So there is a further fulfillment of this particular passage that will take place at the second coming, or before the second coming, of Jesus Christ as it relates to this final fulfillment of the coming of Elijah.

We can get more into that later, but verse 18, follow me now in your Bible as we continue on. *“And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”¹⁹ And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, ...”* Can I just stop you right there for a moment?

Listen, this is not what you want to hear from an angel. I mean, if you ever have an angelic visitation and the angel responds to something you just got done saying by saying his name and that he stands in the presence of God, you know you just messed up.

So he says, *“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.”²⁰ And behold, you will be 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.”*

You look at this passage and you look at Zechariah's question, and on the outside it seems innocent enough, because he's an old man now. But the Lord knew that these words came from him out of doubt. And so the angel told Zechariah that God was going to cause him to become mute until everything had been finally fulfilled.

But before we move on, there's something else here that I want to bring out from this passage that I think is pretty cool to stop and consider and it's in verse 13. Look with me again in verse 13 where the angel is speaking to Zechariah and he says, *“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, (and then this next part) for your prayer has been heard,…”*

That is really a fascinating statement but I'm almost surprised Zechariah didn't say what prayer because the angel went on to tell him what prayer he was referring to. And it was the prayer that his wife might conceive. We wouldn't have known this had the angel not revealed it to us and that we'd not gotten it in the Scripture.

Zechariah being a godly man, knowing that his wife was being looked down upon by the majority of Jews because she had been unable to conceive. And by the way, back in that culture, it was always the woman's fault. Sorry. He prayed for her. He prayed for her. We don't know how long, but he prayed for her, and the angel makes reference to that prayer.

But here's the question we have to ask ourselves. Do you think Zechariah was still praying that prayer? Was he still praying for his wife to conceive? I don't think so. Why? Because when the angel tells him his wife is going to conceive, he doesn't believe it, and the first excuse he gives is, we're too old. He says, essentially, horrible thing to say about a woman, but he says, my wife is advanced in years, which is a very polite way of saying that the baby factory had long since closed up shop. This isn't happening, right.

And so Zechariah had stopped praying. He knew that it was beyond his wife's time to conceive and yet the angel referred to his prayer. The Lord has heard your prayer. It's like wow, you got, we're obviously not on the same timetable here Lord sort of a thing.

But you know this really tells us something amazing about prayer. And it tells us our prayers don't have a shelf life. You and I live in a world where things have a pull date, including us. We even have a shelf life. So many years, and after that shelf life is done, we... A couple years ago, we went to go move my parents out of their, the home that they were in and into a another place. And

my mom has been getting around in one of those battery powered chairs for years now. And there's a lot of cabinets and cupboards that they'd put stuff up that she could no longer even see what was up there, let alone reach it, so stuff just sat up there. We were cleaning out the cupboards and it, oh my. I mean, it's like, honey, this expired in 2009 sort of a thing.

But that's the world that you and I live in and we expect that everything is like that. But this passage shows us that when it comes to our prayer, there's no shelf life.

And I remember the first time this really hit me when I actually was reading this very passage and it was like a bomb went off in my head and in my heart. Because before that time I had always felt like I had to keep praying for something to actually take place, because I was positive my prayers had an expiration date. And I would pray for something for a while, and then I would feel guilty about the fact that I hadn't prayed about it for a while.

And I'd be reminded and go, oh yeah, I got to pray about that. Like, all my prayers before are gone. It was just, they're gone. They just evaporated into midair. And I've just have, I got to start over again, because obviously God hasn't answered it yet, and He, I don't know, He got busy. Misplaced my, I don't know, but I got to go back and I got to do this thing again so that we can get back on track with God and just sort of a thing, keep reminding Him.

That's not what's going on. I don't know how long it had been since Zachariah had prayed for his wife but I'm willing to bet it had been many years since he had prayed for her to conceive a child and yet what does the angel say? The Lord has heard your prayers and your wife is going to have a son. Wow!

Now, I want to be completely honest with you and tell you that there are passages in the Bible where Jesus actually tells us to keep praying and not to give up praying, but that's not because God forgets and that's not because your prayers evaporate into nothingness. It's so that you and I maintain a heart of faith before the Lord.

Let's keep reading. Verse 21, *“And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ² And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them* (what's the sign for really big angel? It's like, or so—I don't know. It's like, how do you do that exactly? But, it's like a weird version of charades sort of a thing, anyway) *And he kept making signs*

to them) and remained mute. ²³ And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home."

Verse 24, *"After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, (here's a woman past her years, but by the power of God, she conceived and it says) and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, ²⁵ "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."* By the way, we don't have any idea why Elizabeth spent 5 months in seclusion. We really don't know.

What we do know is that this pregnancy was a flat out miracle, biologically speaking. This just didn't happen and we know, again, that the Lord was responding to prayers that Zechariah had laid up over the years for his wife. Long forgotten, because now was the time of God's purpose and plan to come to fruition. Don't ever allow yourself people to say, I prayed and nothing happened. That's a lesson Zechariah would teach you. In fact, you might even wag his finger in your face.

Don't you ever say, I prayed and nothing happened, because look what happened to me. I prayed and after I thought there was no possibility for anything to happen, God moved, and God did a miracle. What a beautiful idea to think that our prayers are kept in heaven. Kept. And what's cool about that, and we really shouldn't be all that surprised because, when you and I, when we pray, when we lift up a prayer to God, our prayer enters the timelessness of eternity. Things don't fade there. They don't spoil. They're not stolen. They're not taken away. They don't have a pull date. They're not lost.

Doesn't that give you a whole new thought process about prayer? And the time that you spend in prayer, and the things that you've laid up before the Lord in prayer. He remembers the things that you've long forgotten, but that you prayed about. What an incredible God we serve.

This is the precursor. This is talking about the prophecies related to the coming of Jesus. The one of the messenger, the one who would prepare away. And as we get further into the Book of Luke, and it's amazing. We learn about how powerfully God used John to prepare people's hearts.

We won't get into it right now, but there's a passage later on in the Book of Luke that tells us that John's ministry was absolutely critical. And we'll explain why. We'll talk about why his ministry was so critical for people to open their hearts and receive the coming of Messiah.