

I. Introduction

Good morning! Today we are beginning a new study series in the Gospel of Luke. I expect the journey through Luke to last about a year and a half, with some time out for special messages as well. This study should be a wonderful blessing for us because through Luke, we will be able to really get to know Jesus and draw close to Him.

But first, let's take a few minutes to review the historical context. After Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, was completed in about 430 BC, there was a 400 year gap before the New Testament period. Of course, many books were written during those years, and some are even included in Catholic Bibles, but none are considered by Protestant churches as inspired by God, and so they are not included in our Bibles.

God is always at work, and during the time between the testaments God was at work preparing the world for the coming of Jesus. First, the rise of the Empire of Alexander the Great established Greek as the primary language of trade throughout the Mediterranean world. Then, when Alexander the Great died, his empire was split into four pieces, an event which fulfilled many of the prophecies of the book of Daniel.

The collapse of the Greek Empire also isolated some Jewish groups from others, a situation which eventually led to the decision of Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt to translate the Old Testament into Greek, a task which was completed before 200 BC. This translation is called the Septuagint and later, when Paul traveled and preached in many places, Paul used it since Greek was the common language of the time.

In 168 BC, the Maccabean revolt gave the Jews freedom, and for one hundred years Israel was once again an independent nation. This is a time when the Jewish national identity was strengthened and when the Jewish festival of Hanukkah was established.

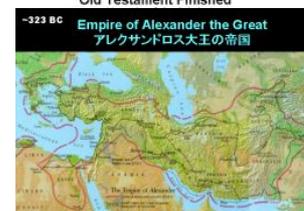
The period of the Maccabees ended when the Romans conquered Israel in 63 BC. Roman rule brought many problems, but it also brought a long period of relative peace and prosperity called the Pax Romana (Peace of Rome), which extended from about 27 BC to 180 AD. During this time the Romans also built an extensive network of roads over which the gospel message would later spread with incredible speed.

King Herod the Great was appointed by the Roman Empire as ruler of Israel and he ruled from 37 BC to 4 AD. On the negative side, Herod was known for his great cruelty which he used against any potential competitors for power. But on a more positive side, Herod was also a great builder. Herod rebuilt and expanded the temple complex in Jerusalem, making it into one of the true wonders of that time. This was the temple that Jesus often visited and taught at during His ministry, and it was the center of Jewish worship until it was destroyed in 70 AD.

In order to build this complex, Herod's workers constructed a huge platform on top of what is actually a mountain peak. The temple is gone, but the platform still remains today, and it is now the foundation on which the Muslim Dome of the Rock stands, as shown in this photo. But the Scriptures prophecy that one day the Jewish temple will be built again. That is the basic historical context for Luke, now let's read his opening words, Luke 1:1-4.



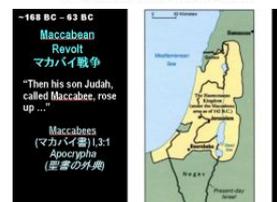
Old Testament Finished



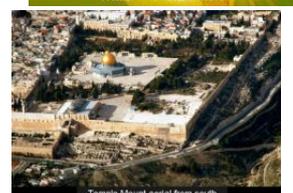
-200 BC



Septuagint (Greek Old Testament)
「七十人訳」のギリシア語旧約聖書



Map of the time of the 1st Christmas
(第一のクリスマスの時の地図)



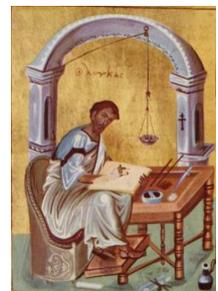
II. Scripture, Luke 1:1-4 (NIV)

[1] Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, [2] just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. [3] Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, [4] so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

III. Teaching #1

Luke is a doctor and he brings the scientific mind to his work, making sure that all that he reports is well-established and verified. Luke takes care to refer to the eyewitnesses that he has interviewed, witnesses who almost certainly included Mary, the mother of Jesus and also many of the apostles. Luke reports that he has carefully investigated everything, making sure that we understand that we are reading established facts in his gospel. The book is addressed to the, “most excellent Theophilus,” a manner of address normally used for important Roman officials. The name, “Theophilus,” means, “friend of God;” and this gives a double meaning. Luke is written for both a particular person named Theophilus, and also for all people who desire to be friends of God.

Luke’s purpose is clearly stated; he is writing so that his reader may, “know the certainty,” of the things that were taught. We can imagine Luke at work, concentrating and praying deeply as he follows the leading of the Holy Spirit. Luke wrote in about 60 AD, probably in Rome, during the time when Paul was in jail awaiting trial. Luke traveled with Paul extensively and is also the author of Acts. Some scholars even think that Luke and Acts were written to defend Paul at his trial, as well as for the church as a whole. According to ancient church tradition, Luke was one of the seventy disciples sent out in Luke 10, but the Bible does not record the names.



Luke opens the gospel story by telling us it is the time of King Herod, and then Luke introduces Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth, and a priest of the temple. In those times the temple priests were divided into 24 groups, or divisions, that took turns at the temple duty over the course of the year. Each group had close to 1,000 priests, and so they drew lots to decide who would have the most important jobs. Burning incense was a great honor, and Zechariah was probably very excited at being assigned this important task. Every morning and every evening the priests conducted worship services and some think it was the time of the morning service when Zechariah entered the temple to offer the incense. If you visit Jerusalem, you can climb up the same steps that the people would have used at that time when they gathered for worship. Like us, they began their worship service with song and praises, although the musical style was quite different. Let’s read Luke 1:5-17.



IV. Scripture Luke 1:5-17 (NIV)

[5] In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. [6] Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. [7] But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years. [8] Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, [9] he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. [10] And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. [11] Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. [12] When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. [13] But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. [14] He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, [15] for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. [16] Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to

the Lord their God. [17] And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous-- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

V. Teaching #2

Zechariah entered the temple and went into the Holy Place. He stood before the incense altar to offer the incense. When the incense burned, the smoke would rise up, representing the prayers of the people going up before God in heaven. We are not told what prayers Zechariah offered that day, but his prayers probably centered on the welfare of the nation and the desire for the Messiah to come. And he may have also prayed for his personnel need. He and his wife had no children, and now they were too old, now only a miracle from God could give them a child. In their longing for a child we have a picture of how God's people have always valued children and of how the Bible honors the little ones.



Zechariah had probably been praying for a child for many years. On this day God finally provided a dramatic answer. **Luke 1:11, "Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense."** Now, in art it is popular to paint angels as being very cute little creatures, but in the Bible people are often terrified whenever an angel appears, and that was Zechariah's reaction also. It is interesting that this angel turns out to be Gabriel, the same angel who appeared to the prophet Daniel hundreds of years earlier, and who will appear to Mary a few months after meeting Zechariah in the temple. Examination of the Bible record shows that God made the angels very early during His work of creation and that angels are extremely long lived. Some angels seem to have particular roles, and Gabriel is seen delivering messages more than once.



In any case, Gabriel appears and begins to deliver his message. **Luke 1:13-15, "[13] But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. [14] He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, [15] for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth."** Gabriel announces that God is going to intervene and give Zechariah and Elizabeth the son they have longed for. This son will be a special person, set apart for God's purposes even before birth. This son is, in fact, John the Baptist, the great preacher of repentance who prepared the way for the coming of Jesus.

To mark his special role, John the Baptist is to be dedicated to live like a Nazarite. The Nazarite vow is described in detail Numbers 6, but a primary feature of the vow is abstention from alcohol, which is what Gabriel mentions. However, perhaps the most extraordinary statement that the angel makes is that he proclaims that John is to be, "**filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.**" The New American Standard Bible (NASB) gives a more literal translation saying, "**he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, while yet in his mother's womb.**" While still in the womb, John will already be filled with the Holy Spirit. This is truly a marvelous work of grace that God has promised to John and his parents.

We should not miss the implications of this statement. This is a very sensitive topic, but it is too important to skip over. The Scriptures always treat the pre-born child as a person, a human being. Pre-born infants are spoken of as people in the Bible, people who experience joy, who feel pain, who are loved by God, and who can even be filled with the Holy Spirit in the womb. And if the infant in the womb is viewed by God as a human being, then we do not have any right to take end that life. Babies have a moral right to be born and to live.

The problems of unplanned pregnancies are many, and I understand that. But abortion is not the solution; abortion is wrong. Those who do not want to bring a baby into the world should make that choice before they become pregnant. I know that this is a fallen world full of difficult situations, and I know that some of you have had abortions. If you are a woman who has had an abortion, or if you are a man or woman who has encouraged someone else to have an abortion, then that was wrong. We need to understand that abortion kills an innocent child; it is a serious sin and we cannot pretend that it is not.

At the same time, I want you to know that the mercy of God is without limit, and the grace of God is sufficient for you. As with other sins, turn to the Lord in prayer, confess your sin, and receive forgiveness. God loves you and He will forgive you for all of your sins. And God also loves your child as well.

One other aspect of this issue that I want to mention is that we should love and support those who have made mistakes. All of us are tempted in many ways and all of us commit various sins. When I see a single woman who is pregnant, I know she has made some mistakes, and I know that she was not alone when it happened. But I will not be angry at her or condemn her, and I pray that no one else would treat her badly either. Rather than making such a person feel uncomfortable or unwanted, we should instead gather around and love and encourage and help her. We have all made our own mistakes, and yet the Lord has freely given us grace. We should follow the Lord's example and show grace freely and generously to those in need. And we should also remember how brave it is to refuse to follow one mistake with a second mistake worse than the first.

VI. Conclusion

John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit while he was still in the womb. And John became a great man of God with an extraordinary ministry. In **Luke 1:16-17**, the angel Gabriel promises, **“Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”**

John prepared the people for the coming of Jesus the Savior by speaking plainly of their sins and calling them to repentance. And yet, John's ministry was not a ministry of condemnation, but instead it was a ministry of grace. Before the Lord could pour out His grace through the cross of Christ, the hearts of the people had to be softened to receive. Many refused to allow their hearts to be softened and they reacted to John's preaching with anger and indignation. But others were ready to confess their sins and repent, and they are the ones who received forgiveness of sins and eternal life.



How about us? Are we angry and defensive when people mention our sins? Or are we ready to turn to the Lord, confess our sins, and receive forgiveness through the blood of Christ, which is sufficient to wash away every sin? I pray that all of us would receive God's mercy and the cleansing from sin that He offers to us with such love and grace.

VII. Closing Prayer