

I. Introduction

Good morning! Christmas is coming; it is time to get ready! Christmas is coming and it is time to prepare our hearts to celebrate the miracle of God coming to save His people. And, it is a special joy to be studying the Gospel of Luke during this season because Luke tells us so much about the coming of our Lord Jesus on that first Christmas, 2,000 years ago. However, Luke does not tell us everything. For example, the story of the Magi, or wise men, appears only in Matthew. But we can imagine them on their journey following the star toward Israel, and eventually to Bethlehem.



I do want to encourage you to read the opening chapters of Matthew as well as Luke during this Christmas season, because each author brings out different details of the story. But for today, we will continue to focus on Luke. Let's read about the birth of John the Baptist in Luke 1:57-66.

II. Scripture #1 Luke 1:57-66

[57] When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. [58] Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. [59] On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, [60] but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." [61] They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name." [62] Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. [63] He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." [64] Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. [65] The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. [66] Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

III. Teaching #1

The time came, and Elizabeth gave birth. Everyone shared her joy, but on the eighth day, when the child was to be named, a disagreement broke out. Some of the relatives wanted to name the boy after his father, Zechariah, but Elizabeth insisted that the boy was to be named John. So, they approached Zechariah, the father, who had not been able to speak since the day when he doubted the word of the angel Gabriel.

In 1434, the Italian painter and monk Fra Angelico painted the scene like this. By now we should not be surprised to see that the painting looks like 15th century Italy, the time and place of the artist rather than of John the Baptist. But perhaps as we look at the painting, we can feel some of the sense of expectancy they felt as they waited to see what Zechariah would write. **Luke 1:63b** tells us, "... and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John.""



Notice that Zechariah does not suggest naming the baby boy John. Rather, Zechariah says the boy's name is John, because the child has already been named. The name John had been chosen by God and announced by the angel ahead of time. (Luke 1:13) Zechariah had learned his lesson well, and now he was ready to believe all that Gabriel had said. **Luke 1:64**, "Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God."

After having lived in silence for months, what were Zechariah's first words when he was once again able to speak? Zechariah had probably been thinking and praying about this for months. He had learned about the danger of speaking hastily, and now he fills his mouth with words of praise to God, and also words of prophecy. Luke recorded these words for us, let's read them in Luke 1:67-80.

IV. Scripture #2 Luke 1:67-80

[67] His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:
[68] "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.
[69] He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David
[70] (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
[71] salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us--
[72] to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant,
[73] the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
[74] to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear
[75] in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
[76] And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
[77] to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,
[78] because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
[79] to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."
[80] And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.

V. Teaching #2

Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and inspired to praise God and to prophesy. His words speak some of the future, but even more he speaks about God's glory and mercy. It is fascinating that Zechariah's first words are not about his own son at all. Before speaking about his son, Zechariah first speaks of the child to be born of Mary. And, as prophets sometimes do, Zechariah speaks of the future work of Christ as if it is already past, because it is already certain. In fact, from God's viewpoint, we can say that it is already done. Notice what Zechariah says, **Luke 1:68, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people."**

Who has come and redeemed his people? It is, **"the Lord, the God of Israel."** We need to let this penetrate deep into our hearts. Jesus is the Lord, the God of Israel. And He has come and redeemed His people, paying the ransom price of the cross to free us from slavery to sin. God carried out His plan of salvation by entering into this fallen world as a man, in the person of Jesus Christ. And so, Christmas is the story of God becoming a man, in order to save us from our sins. The Savior must be God Himself, as Jesus is, because no one else has the power to save us. Consider the words of **Isaiah 43:10-11, "You are my witnesses,' declares the Lord, 'and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior."** Who is the Savior? It is the Lord Himself, come in the person of Jesus, the Son of Mary. And apart from Him there is no savior.

In **Luke 1:76**, Zechariah shifts from prophecy about Jesus the Savior, to prophecy about his own son, who will be John the Baptist. **"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him."** In ancient times, when a king planned a journey, workers were sent ahead to repair the roads and bridges so that the king could pass without any delay or difficulty. This is John the Baptist's role. A great king, the King of kings, is coming; and John is to prepare the way. Isaiah prophesied of these things saying (**Isaiah 40:3-4**), **"A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain."**



John was to prepare the way for the coming of Christ Jesus, the King. But for the coming of Christ, the way was not a physical road; preparing the road was simply a metaphor for preparing the hearts of men and women to receive Jesus. And so, John preached repentance and baptized people in the desert, so that their

hearts would be ready to receive Jesus.

By the way, while we are on this topic, notice that it would have been easy for someone to misunderstand the prophecy of Isaiah by taking it too literally. We know for sure that the prophecy was fulfilled by John the Baptist, because all four of the gospel writers tell us so (Matt. 3:1-4; Mark 1:1-4; Luke 1:76-78; John 1:23). But John the Baptist never took a shovel and went out to fill in a valley or level a mountain to prepare a road. John's work was a work of the heart leading to repentance. The prophecy is symbolic and spiritual; the road that John the Baptist made straight was the road leading to repentance and salvation.

I wanted to mention this, because over the years many people have become confused by taking Bible prophecies too literally, or by thinking that they are certain of the correct interpretation. One of the more dramatic examples of this in recent years was the little book called, "88 Reasons why the Rapture will be in 1988." The author of this book, Edgar Whisenant was confident in his interpretation of the prophecies about the rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18) and the Second Coming. 300,000 copies of the book were mailed to pastors and church leaders for free. 4,500,000 copies were sold. The book was a major topic of conversation at many churches, including at the church I was attending at the time, Abundant Life Fellowship in Okinawa. However, 1988 came and went, and there was no rapture, and Jesus did not return. As a result, many people were hurt and their faith was damaged. But we can learn from this and similar examples. The lesson is, be careful and be humble.



I firmly believe that all of the prophecies of the Second Coming of Christ will be fulfilled. But I do not believe that I, or anyone else, is able to accurately interpret all of the prophecies. Some of the prophecies will not be fully understood until after they are fulfilled. That is okay, it was the same on that first Christmas when Jesus came 2,000 years ago. Jesus fulfilled the prophecies, but some prophecies were not correctly understood until afterwards. Some were very literal, such as Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, and some were less literal, such as the prophecy about John the Baptist preparing the way. It is likely to be the same with the prophecies of the Second Coming.



VI. Conclusion

Throughout church history, there have been many who were confident that they knew the time of the Second Coming. Many of these men and women were very intelligent people who knew their Bibles very well. But so far they have all been wrong. This should make us cautious, whatever our opinions are we should hold them with humility. Jesus is coming again; that is certain. But as Jesus told the disciples in **Acts 1:7**, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority." (See also Matthew 24:36.) It is good to study the prophecies and to strive to understand them, but we need to do so with humility and with faith. Jesus will come again at the perfect time, but only God knows when that time will come. Our task is not to understand all of the prophecies; our task is to be ready for Jesus whenever He comes.



Today, we have seen how Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and how he prophesied about the Christ child and about his own son. When the angel Gabriel first appeared to him in the temple, Zechariah was not ready and he doubted the Good News. But after months of silent contemplation, his heart was prepared and Zechariah was ready. As Christmas approaches, let's make time to prepare our hearts, for the wonderful celebration of the coming of Christ. Let's pray.



VII. Closing Prayer