

1. Zechariah Meets the Angel Gabriel

Luke 1:1-38

Luke: The Life of Jesus

Our goal for this series is for us “to know Jesus Christ more clearly, to love Him more dearly, and to follow Him more nearly” (Richard of Chichester). Luke’s rich and detailed account of Christ’s life gives us unique insights into Jesus and those whose lives He touched. This study will be a steady walk, not a sprint. Get your spiritual walking shoes on!

Introducing Luke

Luke, a Gentile, was a doctor by profession (Colossians 4:14). It is said that a minister sees men at their best, a lawyer sees men at their worst, and a doctor sees men as they are. Luke saw men and loved them all. Luke wrote his book to a man he called "most excellent Theophilus," and the title given to him is the regular title for a high official. We don't know for sure, but many theologians believe that Theophilus could have been Paul's lawyer representing him before Caesar.

Luke’s gospel is a careful piece of work. Luke was with Paul as he sailed to Jerusalem after Paul's third missionary journey, referring to his participation with the words "we" several times in the narrative. It is highly likely that, for the two years that Paul was in prison after the temple riot (Acts 21:30), he was Paul’s companion, visiting with him while Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea, waiting to be taken to Rome. While Luke waited for Paul's transit to Rome, he may have used this time as an opportunity to meet and get witnesses’ testimony for the upcoming trial before Caesar. Luke said that he had carefully investigated everything (Luke 1:3), with an example of his preciseness by dating the emergence of John the Baptist to six other historical facts occurring at that time (Luke 3:1-2).

Luke brought the message to his readers that all barriers are down; Jesus Christ is for all men without distinction. He writes with the poor, despised, and oppressed in mind. For instance:

- The Kingdom of Heaven was not shut to the Samaritans (Luke 9:51-56). Luke alone tells of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:30-37). The one grateful leper healed was a Samaritan (Luke 17:11-19). Generally speaking, the Jews did not have dealings with the Samaritans, as John records (John 4:9), but Luke refuses to shut the door on any man.
- Luke does not exclude those Jews whom the orthodox Jew would have considered unclean. He shows us Jesus speaking with words of approval. Luke alone writes of Jesus’ speaking of the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian as shining examples (4:25-27). The Roman centurion, another Gentile, is praised for the greatness of his faith (7:9). Luke tells us of God’s heart for all the lost, telling us of Jesus’ saying, **“Men will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at the table in the kingdom of God” (13:29).**
- Luke is supremely interested in people experiencing poverty. When Mary brought the offering for her purification, Luke called it the offering of the poor (2:24), showing us that the Lord Jesus identified with the poor of this world and not those born into a wealthy family. When Jesus was setting out His credentials to the emissaries of John, the climax was, **“The poor have good news preached to them” (7:22).** He alone tells the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Poor Man (16:19-31). In Luke’s account of the Beatitudes, the

saying of Jesus runs not, as in Matthew, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (5:3), but simply, “Blessed are you poor” (Luke 6:20). At every opportunity, Luke tells us of Jesus' care for those with little of this world's goods.

- Above all, Luke shows Jesus as the friend of outcasts and sinners. He alone writes of the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet, bathing them with her tears and wiping them with her hair in the house of Simon the Pharisee (7:36-50). Luke is also the one who tells us of Zacchaeus, the deceiving tax-gatherer (19:1-10), as well as the penitent thief on the cross beside Jesus (23:43). He alone of the Gospel writers has the timeless story of the prodigal son and loving father (15:11-32). All four Gospel writers quote from Isaiah 40 when they give the message of John the Baptist, “Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God,” but only Luke continues the quotation to its triumphant conclusion, “And all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:4-6). God sent the Messiah of Israel to save that which is lost, Jew and Gentile alike, and Luke of all the Gospel writers see no limits, no confines, and no pre-requisites to the love of God.

Luke was a true friend to Paul from the first expedition to Paul’s final hours. “Only Luke is with me,” the aging Paul wrote to Timothy from his death cell (2 Tim 4:11). Authoring also the Book of Acts, He was also humble, penning twenty-eight percent of the New Testament, yet not once does he include his name in his work. The closest he came was in the "we" sections of the Book of Acts, when he wrote: “And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (Acts 16:10). Let’s look now at the first few verses:

¹Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³Therefore, 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, ⁴so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1-4).

The Holy Spirit has carefully watched over the writing of His Word and breathed it to us using human instruments so that we may know in the depths of our hearts the certainty of what happened as God Himself stepped into human flesh.

The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold (Vs. 5-24)

⁵In 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. ⁶Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years. ⁸Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside (Luke 1:5-10).

Zechariah, whose name means "the Lord has remembered," is the central character in this scene. He was married to the daughter of a priest, a woman named Elizabeth. Verse six tells us they had a big problem, for Elizabeth was childless and now aged. The Jewish Rabbis said that seven kinds of situations brought about excommunication from God, and the list began, "a Jew who has no wife, or a Jew who has a wife and who has no child." Childlessness was a valid ground for divorce. Elizabeth had surely wondered why God had not given her a child. The Book of Psalms says, **"Behold, children are a gift of the Lord; the fruit of the womb is His reward"** (Psalms 127:3). Elizabeth indeed had thoughts about what she had done wrong since not having children was a stigma to a Jewess. Now, it was too late, for both of them were well along in years (v. 7).

Zechariah belonged to the tribe of Levi, and both he and his wife were descendants of Aaron. His family was of the priestly division of Abijah. Every direct descendant of Aaron was automatically a priest, which meant that there were too many priests, around twenty thousand priests altogether, at the time of Zechariah. It was King David who divided the priests into twenty-four sections. Only during Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles were all involved. For the rest of the year, each section or division served two periods of one week each. The *Mishnah* states that, before each of the two daily services, four sets of lots were taken to determine the participants of the day's events out of the hundreds of priests on duty from their division. It was the highlight of those chosen to finally get the chance to serve in the temple, for no priest was permitted to offer incense more than once in his lifetime. Zechariah's name was chosen to enter into the Holy place to offer incense on the golden altar in front of the Curtain separating the one room from the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest could enter once a year, with the blood of a perfect sacrifice.

What do you think it was like for him? Step into his shoes for a moment. What do you think was in his mind as he prepared for this holy duty of offering incense before the veil separating God from man?

Zechariah's Big Day

It was an awesome thing to enter the Temple, so he would have bathed entirely in the Mikveh, the ritual cleansing bath, before coming up a succession of terraced steps. Each ascending level was composed of the Court of the Gentiles, the Court of the Israelite Women, up passing the barrier to another level, the Court of the Israelites, then the Court of the Levites, and finally, up to the Court of the Priests. There was a multitude of people praying as he made his way to the Altar of Sacrifice (v. 10). With an empty censer in his hand, Zechariah looked beyond the bronze laver of hand and foot washing, up the last twelve steps to the final level of the Temple. The hill he was ascending to was built atop Mount Moriah, the place where more than 3000 years previously, Abraham had been instructed to go the three-day journey to this same hill and was tested to offer up his son, Isaac—the child of the promise, as a sacrifice (Genesis 22:1-4). Of course, God stopped him from sacrificing his son, for it was just a type and a foreshadowing of what God Himself would do through the gift of His Son as a sacrificial Lamb. He said to his son Isaac: **"And Abraham said, my son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together"** (Genesis 22:8 KJV).

All the outlying buildings were not completed by this time, but the temple itself stood before him in white marble and gold. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the time, writes about Herod's Temple, describing a building that:

...wanted nothing that could astound either mind or eye, for being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the solar rays. To approaching strangers, it appeared from a distance like a snow-clad mountain, for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white.¹

After the sacrifice was made at the altar and the blood sprinkled on the coals, the two priests on duty would have stirred the coals before filling Zechariah's censer with hot coals. He would have again meticulously washed his hands and feet, this time at the bronze laver, before climbing the steps to the Temple itself. Thousands of people were likely watching him, some praying, some singing, as he began to ascend the twelve steps up to the Temple. One can only approach God through the blood of a substitute, which is why Zechariah has hot coals on which the sacrificial substitute has bled. It is interesting that even the furniture inside the temple, plus the altar and laver, were laid out in the form of a cross. It was only one time a year that the representative of the nation, the High Priest, could go beyond the Curtain, on the Day of Atonement and then never without blood from a perfect sacrificial lamb. When the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place with the blood, he had little bells sewn onto the hem of his robe. If the other priests could hear the bells as he moved, they knew that he was still alive. If he fell dead, he had a red cord tied to his belt so they could pull him out again. This awe of God was something that must have been in the minds of all priests as they proceeded into this most holy place.

The Appearance of the Angel Gabriel

Zechariah released the coals onto the golden altar before the curtain, praying while sprinkling the incense on top of the coals, just as King David instructed, *“May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice”* (Psalm 141:2). The priest was to then prostrate himself before backing up without turning his back to the veil. As he was praying, through the smoke of the ascending incense, the angel Gabriel manifested to his right alongside the Altar of Incense. Imagine how frightening that must have been for Zechariah!

¹¹Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵for 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. ¹⁶Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts

¹ Josephus, War, V. 5. 3.

of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:11-17).

What do you think was the prayer the Angel said was heard? (1:13). Have you ever had to wait a long time for an answer to prayer and been surprised when that answer came? Explain.

We can not know what Zechariah prayed for, but I am sure that he prayed for a child for many years. It seems that, by this time in his life, Zechariah had no hope that he would have a child. He revealed his unbelief even after being told by the Angel that this was to happen! As a priest and a representative for the people, Zechariah could have also been praying that God would turn the nation of Israel back to Himself. Before the Messiah could come, though, there was to be a messenger that would announce His coming. It would be he who would go before the Messiah and turn the hearts of the fathers to the children. The last prophet that was sent to Israel nearly four hundred years previously had prophesied:

See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple, the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come, says the Lord Almighty (Malachi 3:1).

⁵See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. ⁶He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction (Malachi 4:5-6).

Four hundred years of darkness had passed since that prophecy of Malachi. As a priest and a man of God, he knew all about the controlling and corrupt leadership of Israel that he saw daily. Zechariah would have been familiar with the passages of Scripture concerning the coming of the Messiah and his forerunner. Have you ever thought that, in the foreknowledge of God, we could be the answer to our prayers? Often, God will lay a particular burden on our hearts before He reveals to us that we are the ones called to be the answer to the prayer. It is not a coincidence that he was the one chosen by the lot to offer incense that day. Zechariah was in the plans and purposes of God. As he released the incense on the hot coals of the Altar of Incense symbolizing prayer, he would have prayed for the people of Israel that the Messiah and His forerunner would come and release them from the cruel oppression not only of the corrupt leaders of Israel but also of the Romans, too.

Unbelief and Doubt

¹⁸Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." ¹⁹The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time." ²¹Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²²When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was

completed, he returned home. ²⁴After this, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵"The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people" (Luke 1:18-25).

If you had an opportunity to get close to the veil before the Lord and know without a doubt that He would hear and give you what you asked, what would you ask? Why do you suppose Zachariah was struck dumb?

Like many of us who have prayed for so long for something without getting the answer, Zechariah was living in his limitations at this stage of his life. We can limit God and hinder what He wants to do by our unbelief. Zechariah might have given up on prayer for a child, but God hadn't. Sometimes, the answer to prayer is all about timing. In talking about Zechariah's difficulties with the angel's words, author Chuck Swindoll says,

When Gabriel told him that he was going to have a son, he responded using the emphatic first person in the Greek, *ego*, Luke boldfaces Zechariah's doubt— "for I am an old man." But, employing the same word, *ego*, the angel silences the old man's excuse...and his tongue. "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God."²

It is as if the angel Gabriel said in return, "Excuse me, but do you know to whom you are talking? Do you think I am going to lie to you? I stand in the presence of God." Zechariah must have been struck deaf, too, for chapter 1, verse 62, says that at the circumcision of John, they made signs to Zechariah to find out what he would like to name his son. They would not have made signs if he could still hear. Zechariah had spoken words of doubt, not only to the angel of God but also in front of the very Holy of Holies of God. We must be careful of the words which come from our hearts.

³⁵The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. ³⁶But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. ³⁷For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned (Matthew 12:35-37).

Speaking Words of Faith

The Bible says, "How can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). Your mouth will express what your heart believes. My laptop computer is a wonderful machine and very helpful for writing these messages, but it can only do something if I input the information that I want out of it. If we dwell on all sorts of negativity, don't be surprised if that is what issues from our lives. Unbelief and doubt will always hinder the power of God in our lives. Jesus would often put people out of the room when He thought that they would impair the miraculous power of God with their doubt. When He raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, for instance, He did not let any of the mourners or doubters go in with him, only Peter, James, John, and the parents (Luke 8:51). Faith is the only conductor for the

²Charles R. Swindoll, *The Origination of Something Glorious*, Study guide published by Word Publishing, 1994, Page 22.

power of God to flow. Ask the Holy Spirit if He will stop you before speaking unbelief and doubt into any situation in which you find yourself. Begin to express words of faith to meet your needs.

²²Have faith in God, Jesus answered. ²³I tell you the truth, if anyone **says** to this mountain, "Go, throw yourself into the sea," and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he **says** will happen, it will be done for him. ²⁴Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours (Mark 11:23-24).

Notice from the passage above that Jesus used the word "says" twice when talking about faith that will move mountains-sized impossible situations. One must find out God's will by praying concerning a given situation, but as soon as God's will is known, speak God's word in faith.

One thing that stands out here is that it was in God's house that God's message came to Zechariah. God's voice comes to those who will listen. One should be very receptive when in Church; God will often speak to you through your pastor, the worship, or other parts of our meetings. There is power in the very fact that we assemble with the express purpose of praising and worshipping God and giving time to hear His Word. Jesus said:

For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them (Matt.18:20).

Do you have an example of God speaking to you in a Church meeting? How did a word from God come to you? What or who did God use?

The people outside at the various courts waited for Zechariah to come out of the temple, stand on the porch before the people, and pronounce a blessing. It must have been very frustrating for Zechariah because, after the meeting with the angel, as he made his way down through the terraces, he could not utter the blessing, but he began trying to communicate by making hand signals as to what had happened. How frustrating it is for this man of God not to be able to fulfill his responsibility to bless the people with his words.

Why are we told of Elizabeth's remaining in seclusion for five months? (v. 24). Perhaps this was to keep herself away from anyone who would speak doubt and unbelief into their situation. After Zechariah was struck deaf and dumb, it would have made her acutely aware that disbelief and doubt were a threat to this baby that she had been waiting all her life for. She was taking no chances.

Gabriel assures us that **"nothing is impossible with God"** (Luke 1:37). Abraham was ninety-nine years old, and Sarah was ninety when she became pregnant with Isaac. Here, in this story about Zechariah and Elizabeth, we see a similar pattern. God glorifies His name by working when things are impossible by natural means. Although we can appreciate God at work in our everyday lives, we need to be open for Him to surprise us! Can you imagine what a response Zechariah and Elizabeth would have had to this news? No wonder Elizabeth needed time to accept and understand what was happening to her. Admittedly, this child would have been seen as a miracle and as a sign from God. God was setting the stage for the new chapter that He was beginning, not only in their

lives but also in the lives of the nation of Israel, and though they did not understand this then, the lives of all humanity.

Prayer: Lord, help us to be attentive to Your words and to speak them forth with faith. We thank You for working in quiet ways, in mighty ways, and for all that You do. We give you praise! Help us to quickly believe when we see You at work.

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