

Luke 1

Introduction

The Christmas “story” existed long before there was any such thing as “Christmas.” What we’ve chosen to celebrate in a special way at this time of the year is the first in a whole series of events in which God intervened supremely and climactically in this world that He made. Luke’s Gospel begins with these words:

I. Luke 1:1-4 — Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, 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, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

For Luke, and for all the original eyewitnesses, there was no December 25th and there was no “Christmas,” but there were the things that had been accomplished among them. And so this morning we consider especially the beginning of those things that have been accomplished among us so that we may have “certainty”—a glad and joyful certainty—“concerning the things [we] have been taught.”

II. Luke 1:5 — In the days of Herod, king of Judea [who reigned from the year 37 B.C. to 4 B.C.], there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

We shouldn’t lightly skim over these words. Luke is rooting the account he’s about to narrate in a history that goes back hundreds and even thousands of years – a long and storied history of *God* graciously intervening in this *world* that He created.

Zacharias was a priest, Luke tells us, of the division of Abijah. One thousand years earlier, David, the king, had divided those descended from Aaron by his two sons Eleazar and Ithamar into 24 priestly divisions (1 Chron. 24:1-6). We read in 1 Chronicles twenty-four:

➤ 1 Chronicles 24:7-10 — The first lot fell to Jehoiarib, the second to Jedaiah, the third to Harim, the fourth to Seorim, the fifth to Malchijah, the sixth to Mijamin, the seventh to Hakkoz, **the eighth to Abijah**...

Luke’s reference to Zacharias, the priest, of the division of Abijah carries us back, then, not only one thousand years to the days of David, but even four hundred years before that to the days of Aaron and Moses at the time of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt and the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. In fact, Zacharias had also taken a wife from *the daughters of Aaron*, and her name was Elizabeth.

The temple, with its priesthood, represented the goal of the whole long history of God’s intervening presence and work in the world that He has made. Salvation; rescue; deliverance from the misery and the guilt and the penalty of our sin; being reconciled and brought near again

to God. Luke's reference to "a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah," carries us back not just one thousand years to the days of David, and not just fourteen hundred years to the days of Moses and Aaron, but even two thousand years to the promises God made to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and even before that to the very beginning when the man and the woman were expelled from that first garden temple where God had walked among them. Luke continues in verse 6:

III. Luke 1:6 — And [Zacharias and Elizabeth] were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

Why does Luke tell us this? The main point isn't praise of Zacharias and Elizabeth. The commandments and statutes of the Lord remind us of the law that was given through Moses, fourteen hundred years earlier, revealing not only the people's *need* for salvation, but also God's commitment to *bringing* that salvation into the world. That Zacharias and Elizabeth "were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord" reminds us that there was always a believing remnant in Israel who were waiting for this salvation. Once again, we're carried backward in history so that we might hear what Luke is about to narrate as that for which all of redemptive history has been preparing. And then Luke says this:

IV. Luke 1:7 — And [Zacharias and Elizabeth] had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

In these words, we hear again clear echo's from centuries past. When the first man and the first woman were expelled from Eden, God said that He would not leave us to perish in our sin, but that through the offspring of the woman He would intervene savingly in this fallen world.

- Genesis 3:14–15 — The LORD God said to the serpent, "...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."

When God would remind us that salvation is His work and that we are powerless to bring His salvation into the world, we sometimes find Him furthering His saving purposes against the foil of childlessness. God promised Abraham that in his offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 22:18). And yet we read in Genesis:

- Genesis 11:30; 16:1; 18:11 — Now [Sarah] was barren; she had no child... Now [Sarah], [Abraham's] wife, had borne him no children... Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah.

But in the end—even in her old age—Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac. Isaac married Rebekah, and yet we're told in Genesis 25 that:

- Genesis 25:21 — Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren.

After twenty years of Rebekah's barrenness and Isaac praying, Rebekah conceived and gave birth to twins—Jacob and Esau.

- Judges 13:2 — [In the days of the judges in Israel] There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. And his wife was barren and had no children.

But this introduction is immediately followed by these words:

- Judges 13:3, 5b — And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, "Behold, you are barren and have not borne children, but you shall conceive and bear a son... and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines."

The wife of Manoah did conceive, and it was through her son Samson—as flawed as he was—that God continued to carry forward His saving purposes in the world. Finally, we read in 1 Samuel chapter one:

- 1 Samuel 1:1–2 — There was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Elkanah... He had two wives. The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other, Peninnah. And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.

In the end, we know that God "remembered" Hannah, and she conceived and gave birth to Samuel by whom David was anointed king of Israel – the David with whom God made a covenant that his descendant would sit on the throne in Jerusalem forever.

When Luke tells us now that Zacharias and Elizabeth "had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years" we're carried back again into an already long history of God intervening in this world to accomplish what is *impossible* for us. It's not just the birth of these children that was "miraculous." The greater miracle—because it was infinitely more impossible—was to be the salvation that God would bring into the world *through* the offspring of the woman.

V. Luke 1:8–10 — Now while [Zacharias] was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.

The altar of incense was the piece of furniture in the temple closest to the ark of the covenant, just on the other side of the partition separating the holy place from the most holy place. The smoke from the burning incense symbolized the prayers of the people ascending before God (cf. Ps. 141:2; Rev. 5:8; 8:3-4); and the placement of the altar closest to the ark of the covenant symbolized God's willingness to hear and answer the prayers of His people. When we see "the whole multitude of the people... praying," what we're seeing is the believing remnant in Israel, throughout hundreds of years, praying for God's salvation. When we see them praying "at the hour of incense," we're reminded that God was the one who invited them to cry out to Him and

who had promised them that He would hear and that He would answer. It's in the light of all this that we read in verses 11-12:

VI. Luke 1:11-13 — And there appeared to [Zacharias] an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zacharias shook when he saw him, and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.”

The appearance of the angel of the Lord at precisely this “hour,” “standing on the right side of the altar of incense,” tells us that he's come in response to all the prayers of all God's people throughout all the centuries gone by. And yet the angel's words also imply that he's come in response to Zacharias' prayer for a child. So what do the prayers of God's people for forgiveness and deliverance and salvation have to do with the prayers of Zacharias and Elizabeth for a child of their own (a prayer that they had long ago stopped praying)? “John” means “God is gracious.” What does God graciously intervening on behalf of Zacharias and Elizabeth have to do with God graciously intervening on behalf of all the people standing outside? The angel of the Lord said to Zacharias:

VII. Luke 1:14-17 — “And *you* will have joy and gladness, and *many* will rejoice at his birth, 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. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 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.”

By now we understand that these words of the angel don't come from out of nowhere. Even this angelic message is steeped in language carrying us back in history. In the law of Moses provision was made for any man or woman to take a vow whereby he would be specially devoted to God for a period of time (Num. 6). As a part of this (Nazirite) vow he was to abstain from wine and strong drink and no razor was to touch his head (Num. 6:3, 5). When the angel says that the child to be born to Zacharias and Elizabeth must never drink wine or strong drink we understand that he will be set apart by God even from birth – reminding us of Sampson and of Samuel in the Old Testament. Both were born to women who were previously unable to conceive and both were used by God to further His saving purposes in the world.

- Judges 13:3-5 — The angel of the LORD... said to [the wife of Manoah], “...be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb.”
- 1 Samuel 1:11 — [Hannah] vowed a vow and said, “O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed... give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.”

When the angel says that this child will be “filled with the Holy Spirit,” we're reminded of others throughout the history of God's people who were filled with the Holy Spirit in order that through them God might intervene savingly for His people (cf. Exod. 31:3; 35:31; Judg. 3:10; 6:34;

11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14; 1 Sam. 10:6, 10; 11:6; 16:13). That this child will be filled with the Holy Spirit “*even from his mother’s womb*” is a sign that he will indeed be “great before the Lord” so that *among those born of women*, there has arisen before him no one greater (Lk. 7:28).

And then, finally, the angel announces that this child will be the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy:

- Malachi 3:1 — 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.
- Malachi 4:5–6 — 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.

In all of this, Luke’s readers are being swept backward in history so they might hear what Luke narrates now as that for which all of redemptive history has been preparing – so that they might hear what Luke narrates now as God’s supreme and climactic intervention in this world. What, then, is the proper response to this announcement of the angel?

VIII. Luke 1:18 — And Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”

Zacharias is a righteous man, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. Zacharias *believes*. But sometimes, irrationally, doubt exists side by side with faith. Zacharias has long been resigned to the fact that he and Elizabeth will never have a child. And so what he stumbles over now is not the truly “impossible” miracle of God accomplishing the salvation of the world, but the far lesser “miracle”—if it can even be called a miracle in comparison—of his wife bearing a son in her old age. Because Zacharias doubts the lesser thing, he’s not yet able to rejoice in that greatest miracle of all – the miracle for which he, along with the whole multitude of the people standing outside, was praying even at that very moment. If the birth of a son to Zacharias and Elizabeth was really just about them, then his doubt might be more “excusable,” but since the birth of this child has everything to do with the salvation that God has been *preparing* for *all* His people throughout *all* of history since the very beginning—can you see now that the doubt of Zacharias must be wholly inexcusable? So we read in verses 19-20:

IX. Luke 1:19–20 — And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel [the one who spoke of these very things to the prophet Daniel long ago (Dan. 8:16; 9:21), and who comes now in the strength of the Lord; Gabriel means “God is my strength”]. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 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.”

Zacharias’ responds to the announcement that God is now supremely and climactically intervening in this world with words of skepticism and doubt. What could be more wrong than this? How can this “good news” be met with unbelief in the very one God has chosen to bless

with a son in his old age – a son who will “go before [the Lord]... to make ready for the Lord a people prepared?”

“How will I *know* this?” Zacharias asks. How can I be *convinced* that these words will come true? The angel answers: “Behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place.” If what the angel has said is true, then nothing could be more wrong than Zacharias’ words of skepticism and doubt. Therefore, the mouth that has spoken these words will be silent and unable to speak *as a sign* that the angel’s words are, indeed, *true* (the sign Zacharias asked for); and as a sign, too, of what the only right response is to this good news. We go on to read in verses 21-25:

X. Luke 1:21–25 — And the people were waiting for Zacharias, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. 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 and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.”

This joy of Elizabeth in the favor that God has shown to her is a sign of the far greater joy that will be hers in the salvation that is now coming into the world. It’s this greater joy that comes to us all even in the midst of all other sorrows and griefs. So Luke continues:

XI. Luke 1:26–33 — In the sixth month [of Elizabeth’s pregnancy] the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus [Yahweh saves]. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

This son to be born to Mary is the one in whom all God’s saving purposes are brought to their fulfillment. This child, therefore, *is* God’s supreme and climactic intervention in this world. This son who will be born to Mary is the promised “offspring of the woman,” the son of Abraham, the son of David, come to crush the serpent and deliver us from sin and death and reign over us forever. What is the only right response to this good news?

XII. Luke 1:34 — And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

Mary doesn’t ask, “How will I know?” she asks, “How will this be?” Is the angel really saying that this is going to happen *now* (which is what it sounds like he’s saying), or is the angel saying this is going to happen *later, after* her marriage to Joseph? There is no skepticism or doubt here. Mary believes thus far that these things *will* be, but she wonders *how*—or *when*—since she is a virgin.

XIII. Luke 1:35–37 — And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. **For nothing will be impossible with God.**”

If conceiving a child in old age was impossible with God, or if a virgin conceiving and bearing a son was impossible with God, then how much more impossible must be the salvation of a lost and guilty and hell-bound world? On the other hand, if this salvation is not impossible with God, then nothing—NOTHING!—will ever be impossible with God. The birth of a son to Elizabeth in her old age and the birth of a son to Mary when she was still a virgin are reminders to us that even our salvation—even the salvation of the world—will not be impossible *with God*. What is the only right response to this good news?

XIV. Luke 1:38 — And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

Mary doesn’t stumble over the lesser miracle because she sees what the greater miracle really is. Yes, if this virgin birth was really about her, why shouldn’t we expect skepticism and doubt? But since this virgin birth has everything to do with the salvation God has been *preparing* for *all* His people throughout *all* of history since the very beginning— *since this is so, therefore* she believed; she submitted herself unreservedly to the word of the Lord.

XV. Luke 1:39–45 — In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. **And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.**”

Mary believed not just that she would conceive as a virgin; she believed that God was supremely and climactically intervening in this world for our salvation (cf. Lk. 1:46-56).

What is the only right response to this good news that the angel brings? It’s faith! It is to believe in God’s salvation. We see this not only in the example of Mary’s words, but in the silence of Zacharias. For at least nine months, Zacharias has been unable to speak because he didn’t believe the angel’s words – he didn’t believe that Elizabeth could conceive. But all along—deeper down than his skepticism and doubt—Zacharias has always believed God’s promise of salvation. So how will he respond when his mouth is opened and his tongue is loosed? How ought we all to respond to this good news?

XVI. Luke 1:57–68a — Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called

him Zacharias after his father, but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, **and he spoke, blessing God.** And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him. And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, **saying, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel...”**

Over and over again, we see these words in the Psalms.

- Psalm 41:13 — **Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel**, from everlasting to everlasting!
- Psalm 72:18 (cf. v. 19) — **Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel**, who alone does wondrous things!
- Psalm 106:48 — **Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel**, from everlasting to everlasting! And let all the people say, “Amen!”
- Cf. Ps. 18:46; 28:6; 31:21; 66:20; 68:19, 35; 89:52; 113:2; 124:6; 135:21; 144:1

The Latin translation of these words is “*Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel.*” And so this word that Zacharias spoke when his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed has come to be known as “The Benedictus” – the “fulfillment” of every other “Benedictus” that had ever come before.

XVII. Luke 1:68–79 — “*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel*, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant **David**, as he spoke by the mouth of his **holy prophets from of old**, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy **promised to our fathers** and to remember his holy **covenant**, the oath that he swore to **our father Abraham**, to grant us that we, being **delivered** from the hand of our enemies, might **serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him** all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of **salvation** to his people in the **forgiveness of their sins**, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into **the way of peace.**”

Zacharias sees past the miracle of a son born to Elizabeth in her old age to that infinitely greater “miracle” of God’s supreme and climactic intervention in this world for our salvation. Zacharias has been reminded of what he’s always known and believed: Nothing will be impossible with God. And so his mouth is opened and his tongue is loosed in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord God of Israel. May the Lord open our mouths and loose our tongues so that we might always be blessing Him for His great salvation.