

LUKE 1:1-38

TWO ANGELIC ANNOUNCEMENTS

Following the Books of Matthew and Mark which we have just journeyed through, we are now presented with another Gospel-account, in which we are taught of the earthly life and ministry of our Lord Jesus. The author of this Gospel was Luke, the “beloved physician”; and he was indeed a Jew. In the Book of Romans (3:1-2), we are told that one of the privileges that the Jews were blessed with was that the Lord ordained them to be the primary scribes and “library-keepers” of the Scriptures. Since Luke wrote more of the New Testament than any of its other human penman (even slightly more than Paul!), to say that he was non-Jewish would be contradicting the testimony of Romans 3.

Luke’s preface (verses 1-4) is a perfect gem of literary charm. As a prologue, it is unsurpassed for brevity, modesty, and dignity. However, its value lies not in merely its beauty; but also in its testimony to the veracity of the writer, and to the historic worth and absolute credibility of the Gospel-narrative. On the pages of Luke’s Gospel, we are admitted to the study of a great historian. He has before him many written accounts of the ministry of Christ. By comparing and combining them, he has secured valuable outlines for his detailed narrative. He also tells us that he is living and writing amidst the scenes and in the very atmosphere of the events which he is recording; only recently had these things transpired. He has access to the testimonies of men and women who were eye-witnesses of these events. Furthermore, he assures us of the absolute accuracy with which he has investigated the incidents of the life and ministry of Jesus – even from the earliest scenes. He has sifted his material and weighed the evidence, and he is recording only documented and established facts. These facts, he is writing down “in order” – that is, in the chronological sequence of time, and with the systematic and careful attention to proportion and completeness which should characterize a reliable historical composition. Surely such an introduction must remind every reader that our Christian faith is based upon an impregnable foundation of historical fact!

Let us take a few moments to survey this blessed Book as a whole. As might be expected, the narrative composed by such an author as Luke is characterized by unusual literary beauty. But Luke was not only a man of refined culture; he was also a Christian physician, and so he was a man of wide and tender sympathies. Hence his record of the Gospel-history is told from the perspective of real human life. It is suffused with emotion; it is full of gladness and sorrow; it is a record of songs and tears; it is vocal with both praise and prayer. His narrative is very distinctly characterized by its absorbing human interest.

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ Luke’s introduction to his Gospel-narrative – verses 1-4
- ❖ Gabriel tells Zacharias that he and his wife would have a son – verses 5-25
- ❖ Gabriel tells Mary the news that she shall be the mother of Jesus – verses 26-38

Luke's Gospel is the Gospel of childhood. By its tender stories of the births of John and Jesus, it places an unfading halo of glory around the brow of infancy; and it is his record alone that preserves the precious picture of the boyhood of our Lord.

It is also the Gospel of womanhood. It sketches for us that immortal group of women who were closely associated with the life of Jesus. In its pages, we meet Elisabeth, the Virgin-Mother, the aged Anna, the widow of Nain, the sisters at Bethany, the repentant woman who anointed the Savior's feet, the suffering woman who was afflicted by Satan, the group of women who ministered to Jesus on His journeys, and the "daughters of Jerusalem" who were weeping on the way to Calvary.

It is the gospel of the home. It gives us glimpses of the family life at Nazareth, of the scene in the home of Simon, of the hospitality of Mary and Martha, and of the evening meal with the two disciples at Emmaus. It also presents us with the parables of the persistent friend at midnight, of the woman searching her house for her lost coin, and of the prodigal son returning to his father's home.

This is the Gospel of the poor and the lowly. It warns us against the perils of wealth, and it expresses sympathy and hope for those who are oppressed by poverty and need. This sympathy is sounded in the song of Mary, in the first sermon of the Savior, and in the first Beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit!" Luke also records the parables of the rich fool and of the rich man and Lazarus; and, like Mark, he paints the portrait of the widow offering her two mites to the Lord.

It is also the Gospel of praise and of prayer – expressions of the deepest convictions and longings of the human heart. The narrative opens with a scene in the Temple, at the hour of prayer and the burning of incense. It has also preserved for us the Magnificat of Mary, as well as the song of Zacharias and the good news that the angels brought the shepherds on the night of the Savior's birth. And it closes with the benediction of the ascending Lord, and the thanksgiving of His joyful disciples.

These characteristics of Luke's Gospel blend very well with the unique picture of the Savior that he portrays. The character of Jesus is so complex that it defies exact analysis by any human observer, and yet it is evident that certain of its features were successively emphasized by each one of the Gospel writers. Matthew depicts the Kingly majesty of Christ, while Mark speaks much of His nature as the suffering Servant. John highlights Christ's sublimity as the Son of God; but Luke reveals His beauty and attractiveness to humankind, as he paints a portrait of the ideal Man – the Savior of the world! And in regard to the Manhood of Jesus, there are two or three moral qualities which He exhibited in a superlative degree, upon which Luke lays special stress: His matchless courage, His tender and sympathetic compassion, and His continual fellowship with His Father.

Luke's Gospel is a narrative that is full of gladness, praise, and prayer. It is characterized by a sense of tender, human interest, as well as of heavenly grace. It is very fitting, therefore, that Book should open with a scene in the Temple at the hour of the offering of incense, and with a Divine promise that fills a heart with rapturous joy (verses 5-25). This promise concerns the birth of one who is to prepare the way for the ministry of Christ, and this ministry forms the sum and substance of the Gospel-story. The time when all this took place was "in the days of Herod" the Great. He was a monster of cruelty; and as a vassal of the Roman government, he ruled the Jews with savage tyranny. But the political slavery of the people was just as pitiful as their spiritual decline; for by this time, their religion had mostly become an empty formality, and a mere system of ceremonies and rituals. However, in all times throughout history, God is never without His witnesses and His true worshipers. In these days, His group of faithful believers included "a certain priest named Zacharias" and his wife Elisabeth. They lived in the hill-country of Judea, south of Jerusalem; and they "were both righteous before God," but their home was childless.

Twice each year, for the seven days appointed for his rotation of priests to minister in the Temple, Zacharias went to Jerusalem to perform the sacred tasks of his priestly duties. And at length, there came to him a privilege which a priest could enjoy only once in his whole lifetime! The "lot" fell upon him; and he was



thereby Divinely chosen to enter the Holy Place at the hour of prayer, and to offer incense upon the golden altar in front of the veil – behind which was the visible manifestation of the very presence of God Himself! As the cloud of perfumed incense began to rise, as the true symbol of accepted petitions, an angel appeared to the startled priest and assured him that his supplications had been heard. The angel (who was Gabriel) declared to Zacharias that his prayer for national salvation had been heard, and he gradually unfolded the contents of the Divine answer – namely, that the Messiah was about to appear; and His coming was to be heralded by a son who was to be born to the aged priest himself! The angel spoke with detailed specifics: the child would be named John; many would rejoice at his birth; and he would be a Nazarite, who would take the vow of total dedication to God. And as a result of this dedication, he would be filled with the Holy Spirit, thereby enabling him to lead his nation to repentance. He would labor in the spirit and power of Elijah – calling people to live their lives in natural affection and justice, and preparing them for the salvation which Christ would soon bring.

Such a surprising message was too great to be believed at once by the wondering priest. He had ceased to hope that the longing of his heart could ever be fulfilled. Therefore, he asked for a sign by which he might be assured that the

promise was true. The angel replied with a statement of his own majestic power and of the glory of his mission, and he did indeed grant Zacharias a sign which was both a rebuke and a blessing. It rebuked the unbelief of the elderly priest, and yet it also strengthened his faith. He was smitten with the inability to speak, but this was only to continue until the angel's promise had been fulfilled.

The record of the angelic announcement to Mary of the birth of Jesus (verses 26-38) is the crown of all prophecy. The same Gabriel who had spoken to Zacharias now speaks again. But this time, he does not come to an aged and distinguished priest, amidst the splendors of the Temple in Jerusalem; but rather, to a humble maiden who was engaged to be married to a carpenter in an obscure village of Galilee. "Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women!" Such was the angelic salutation that was spoken to encourage and cheer the startled girl. But then she was further amazed by Gabriel's message: "Thou shalt ... bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus." Before her marriage, she was to become a mother; and she was to call her child by that significant name which signifies "Savior!" "He shall be great," continued the angel – both in His Person, as "the Son of the Most High"; and also in His royal power, for the Lord would "give unto him the throne of his father David" – a reference to the spiritual and unending Kingdom of the Messiah.

The exclamation of Mary expressed astonishment at what the angel told her, but not unbelief. "How shall this be?" she asked him. Then came the answer which is unsurpassed as a clear and sublime statement of the incarnation: "The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee." The creative power of God was to rest upon Mary; and as a result, her Child would indeed be "the Son of God." And as an assurance of the truth of his promise, Gabriel added a proof in the surprising fact that Elisabeth – the elderly cousin of Mary – was also to be blessed with the birth of a son within three months' time. This was a fulfillment of that other promise which had previously been made by the same angelic messenger, and the marvel of Elisabeth's case would assure Mary of the certain accomplishment of the gracious and even more surprising promise that was now being made to her.

Mary's reply to all of this is unequalled in the entirety of human history, as an expression of perfect faith: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word." Thus she revealed her belief in the Word of God, and she manifested a spirit of submission to the will of God. There was no doubt in her mind as to the truth of the Divine promise, with all that it suggested of miracle and mystery. And this is the true and faithful story of how Mary was to become the mother of the Messiah – the long-awaited Seed of the Woman, and the Savior of the world (Gen. 3:15).

Lord, we pray for Your Holy Spirit to be our Teacher as we begin our study of the Book of Luke, so that we may enter into a right understanding of those mysteries of Godliness which shall make us wise unto salvation, through faith in Jesus! Amen.