

A Purposeful Beginning

Luke

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Bible Text: Luke 1:5-11

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If you would, please, turn to the gospel of Luke chapter one. Luke chapter one and we read beginning with verse five.

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. Now while he 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. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.¹

Let's go together to our God in prayer.

Lord, it is a joy this morning to be ready to share with your people the things that I have been studying and that you have taught me. And I thank you, Lord, for the work you have done in my own heart this week as I have looked into your Word and I pray that you would help me this morning to convey those things to my brothers and sisters. We ask, Lord, that you would be at work in a mighty way during this hour of preaching. We pray that you would instruct our minds and challenge our hearts, encourage us and correct us and prepare us for what lies ahead of us and in every way be at work in the preaching of your Word to bless your people. We pray for any in our midst—and we are certain, Lord, that there are some—who do not know you. Our prayer, our desire is for their salvation. We pray, Lord, that you would gather men and women, young people to yourself by faith in your Son and in that way demonstrate your glory and put on display your mercy. No one deserves it, but we thank you for the great work of salvation that you do in human souls. Lord, we love you and we thank you that you have loved us and that you love us and that our lives are in your hand and you are faithfully guiding your people, Lord, to

¹ Luke 1:5-11.

our destination which is to exist forever in your presence and to be conformed to the image of our Savior. Help us, Lord, we ask, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, last week we looked at this very official sort of prologue, verses one through four where Luke opens this gospel basically in the same way that any secular work of history would have been introduced. And in doing that he has told us, in effect, that what he is doing here, though it is theologically driven and though it has a theological purpose, what he is doing here is a very careful work of history. He tells us that he is going to be giving to Theophilus the exact truth about the things that he has been instructed in. He wants this man's faith and our faith to be assured based upon actual history, based upon what has actually been accomplished by God in his days in his time. And he also told us in those first four verses not only would he be very careful and very exact in what he passes on to us, but he is going to do this in a very orderly way. He wants to set forth an orderly account.

He says in verse three:

“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.”²

So accurate, theologically, weighty and orderly. This is what he is going to be doing.

So that he doesn't begin when he launches into verse five and, by the way, even his language changes. He goes from this sort of very formal kind of Greek to a very Semitic kind of Greek and so he is now speaking to the common man and as he launches into verse five it is not accident that he begins with the birth, the account of the birth of John the Baptist.

The question I want us to think about together today is why does he begin here? Why not just begin with Jesus? Ultimately that is who he is telling us about in this gospel. He is going to be telling us about our Savior, the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. Why does he begin with the birth of John the Baptist? Why tell us about this miraculous birth? Why tell us about his parents? We know this is not accidental. He has already been careful to tell us that he is going to be careful and he is going to be orderly. So why does he begin here? That is what I want us to think about together. And there is an answer to that question and it is a glorious answer, but I want us to get to it in due time.

The first thing I want you to notice is the context for what he is passing on to us. He tells us in verse five it is:

“In the days of Herod, king of Judea.”³

This is not “once upon a time.” This is not mythical. This is actual history. These events took place in the days of Herod king of Judea.

² Luke 1:3.

³ Luke 1:5.

What do we know about this king, King Herod? Later he was known as Herod the Great. He is the first of the Herods who ruled in Palestine. In fact, one of the things you have to do when you study the New Testament, the gospels specifically, is you have to—and the book of Acts—you have to make sense of all these Herods. There is more than one, but they all had their beginning with this Herod.

He is a complicated figure from history. At times he is a study in contrasts. The son of Antipater, he was a very ambitious man and a very capable man. He began ruling when he was 25 years old. His father gave Galilee to him and Judea to his brother. And this Herod won instant recognition from Rome and also he began to get the attention of those over who he was ruling when he was very capable in putting down rebellion as it was taking place in Galilee, sort of the terrorism of their day. He had a leading rebel arrested and executed and he was very capable in putting down the rebellion in Galilee. And right away that got the attention of Rome and many of the Jewish people.

But after his father died he had to flee from Palestine because the Parthians invaded and he made his way to Rome, barely escaped with his family. Many did not escape, but he did. And there in Rome in the year 40 BC by the Roman Senate he was named King of Judea. But he was given a prize that still required some work. The Parthians had to be driven out and so with the help of Rome in 37 BC that was done and he was King of Judea.

Well, one of the things he is very famous for was all of the building projects that he engaged himself in. He expanded a lot of things. He strengthened a lot of things. He built a lot of things. In terms of Jewish story the most glorious thing that he did is he... the temple that existed at the time that Jesus was here on the earth, that was Herod's temple. That was his building project.

Josephus tells us that that temple was absolutely glorious. He said that, for instance, in the morning when the sun would hit it, it was so overlaid with gold that a man had to hide his eyes to protect his eyes as the sunlight would flash off the gold on the temple. What wasn't gold was so white he said that from a distance it looked like a mountain covered with snow.

It wasn't finished in the days of our Lord. It was still under construction, but it was functioning and it was glorious.

He expanded military outposts. He constructed some very cities, a port city, Caesarea.

He at times appeared to be a generous man. In the year 25 BC there was a great famine in the land and he had some of his own gold objects melted down and he used the proceeds to feed the poor. But I have to think that some of that was very calculated. You see, he was an Idumean, he was an Edomite and so he was never accepted by the Jewish people, not completely.

He had more than one wife, of course, one was a very strategic choice. He married a daughter of the Hasmonean dynasty, the Jewish family that ruled Palestine for most of the inter-testamental period. And so I am sure he thought that marrying this woman would win him favor, but it never really did. In fact, nothing that he did ever really fully won him the wide spread favor of the Jewish people.

But he did have some. He did have some who were devoted to him. In fact, in the New Testament you will read about the Herodians and that was a pro Herod political group.

So at times he appeared to be generous, but he was also very cruel. In Herod's the most important thing was Herod. This is why even though according to accounts he really did love that daughter of the Hasmoneans, he really did love that wife, he eventually had her executed and her mother and her brother and his own two sons. Anything that threatened, from his point of view. He was a very paranoid man. Jealous. Anything that threatened his power he had to get rid of. In fact, it wasn't uncommon for him to have his family members in prison and then to have them executed. It is said that he had some prisoners who were to be executed on the day of his death because if there was no mourning in Jerusalem for himself, at least there would be mourning there on the day that he died.

Finally, as the Bible tells us, the most cruel thing that he ever did, probably is recorded in Matthew chapter two and that is when he received news that there was a King, a future King that had been born and he was made angry because he couldn't find out where that future king was, he had every male child two years of age and under in Bethlehem and the surrounding area slaughtered.

This is when he is an old man. This is the paranoia of this king. This is the commitment to himself that he would have little children slaughtered to make sure that he would get rid of a rival.

Just let that sink in. Imagine if a ruler right now gathered up every little boy two years of age and under in the city of Springfield and had them all executed, all put to death. This is what he did.

This is Herod. And it is in the days of Herod, king of Judea, that John was born and Jesus was born.

It is interesting to me that Herod is mentioned because what a contrast. It was in the days of a very proud king that the most humble king yet the most worthy king who has ever existed was born, Jesus. In the days of a king who so wanted to hold on to his power that he would have little babies murdered, in the days of a king like that, the entrance of a king who was willing not... the Bible says:

...though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.⁴

He did this in order to rescue us from our sins.

So the days of a king who held on to his glory with all of this kind of jealousy and fervor, there was a king who laid aside the visible expression of his glory in order to save sinners.

And so also in the days of this king was born the humble King's forerunner.

And that is the next thing we see in verse five.

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.⁵

We are being told here about the parents of John the Baptist. John's father Zechariah was a priest. But we can say this morning he was just a priest, because according to accounts at this time there were somewhere between 18,000 to 20,000 priests. Every qualified son of Aaron was automatically a priest. Practically speaking that meant that they had a ton of them.

These priests, we are told, were broken down into divisions. You see, in verse eight:

“Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty...”⁶

There were 24 divisions of these priests. This happened under David. You can read about in 1 Chronicles 24 verses four through 19 how they divided up the priests into divisions. Abijah's division was the eighth division. However it is very unlikely that Zechariah was actually a descendant of Abijah because according to Ezra chapter two after the Babylonian exile only four divisions returned to Judea. So what happened is these four divisions then were divided up into 24, not because they actually... not because, for example, Zechariah actually descended from Abijah, but it was just traditional. They wanted to return to the tradition of these 24 divisions and so they took the name, the names of these 24 divisions even though they may not have been descended from them.

⁴ Philippians 2:6-7.

⁵ Luke 1:5-7.

⁶ Luke 1:8.

So Zechariah belonged to the division of Abijah, the eighth division. And he served as a priest. This was a great privilege. This was a very important role in the life of Israel. The priests would represent God to the people, mediate God's truth to the people and then they would represent the people unto the Lord through sacrifices. They lived their lives for the most part of in the villages and, in fact, they served in the temple only two weeks out of a year. There was this biannual service and so you would serve one point in the year. Later on you would serve another point. You would serve from sabbath to sabbath. That would be your week to serve at the temple.

When you weren't at the temple, then you lived out in the villages and you would teach people the Word of God and you would judge when it came to matters between people and you would give counsel. You would shepherd people.

So from the Lord to the people with his Word and then through the sacrifices, the people bringing them to God thought these sacrifices.

There were times during the year when all the priests would be on duty—the Passover, the feast of Tabernacles—but outside of that only two weeks would you serve in the temple. And a true priest delighted in those two weeks. He would look forward to those two weeks.

John's father was a priest. His mother was the daughter of priests. You will notice it tells us in verse five:

“And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron.”⁷

So not only was his father descended from Aaron, but so was his mother. That was sort of a double honor on the part of his father. A priest could marry any, you know, genuine Israelite woman, a godly woman, purely descended, but it was especially honorable if you married the daughter of a priest. So you sort of kept it in the family.

So not only did his father have this, you know, lineage of priesthood, but his mother grew up in a family of priests. They had grown up with the temple service. They had grown up shepherding people. They had grown up with an understanding of sacrifice and what those sacrifices really meant. The fact that Zechariah would marry a daughter of Aaron says something about his godly character. He cared about the priesthood. He took it seriously. John was born to a godly couple.

We don't just have to sort of gather that from the fact that he married the daughter of a priest, but Luke is very careful just to tell us flat out that these were godly people.

Verse six.

“And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.”⁸

⁷ Luke 1:5.

They were both righteous, get this, not in the sight of men. This is something that Luke is doing early on in this letter that is very impactful. When we realize that Judaism for the most part had become apostate. When you think about the Pharisees and you think about the Sadducees and you think about all the hypocrisy and you think about the Christ making his entrance into the world and most of the Jews did not recognize him for who he was and did not receive him for who he really is. When you think about the state of religion in Palestine at this time and then you see that here are two people who are for real. They have a real faith in the Lord. They have a real understanding of religion. They are true believers.

Luke is telling us they weren't righteous in the sight of men like much of the hypocritical religion of the day, but they were both righteous in the sight of God. What a statement that is, that God views these people as righteous.

What does that mean? That means they were both justified. For God to consider you righteous means he has not imputed your sins to you. It means he has forgiven your sins and he has imputed righteousness to you. Now you are righteous in his sight. And we know how God makes people righteous in this way, how he pronounces them righteous in this way. And it is by faith. It is when you believe the Lord regarding salvation. It is when you place your faith in the Lord in agreement with what he has revealed about salvation. When you believe God...

“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”⁹

This is how people are righteous before the Lord which means that Zechariah and Elizabeth and all their history with the priesthood and all their history with the sacrifices, they had a biblical right understanding of what those sacrifices really mean in the Old Testament.

They would have understood, for example, Isaiah 61:10.

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD;
my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.¹⁰

Right? The picture of God clothing someone with righteousness.

⁸ Luke 1:6.

⁹ Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23.

¹⁰ Isaiah 61:10.

The understood this was not something you earned. They understood this was not something you get by law keeping. They understood this was a gift from the Lord on the basis of faith.

Folks, don't be mistaken. People were saved in the Old Testament the same way they are saved today by the grace of God, by faith in God's provision for our sins.

They would have understood Isaiah 53:5.

But he was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.¹¹

God punishing our sins in the body of a substitute.

Did they understand as clearly as we do today? Of course not. There was not as much revelation given to them. But they understood to the degree that they believed the Lord and they were saved. They were declared righteous. They were forgiven.

In fact, Jesus said this in John 8:56.

“Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.”¹²

There is Abraham looking forward to the coming of the Messiah with a biblical understanding of who the Messiah was to be. This is Zechariah. This is Elizabeth. They have an understanding of these things.

I think one of the greatest indicators that that is true is when their son John saw Jesus he didn't say, “Behold the King.” He could have said that. Jesus is the King. But he didn't say behold the King, did he? When John saw Jesus what did he say?

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”¹³

Behold the Lamb. Behold the sacrifice.

He learned that from the Lord, but no doubt, he also learned that from his parents.

¹¹ Isaiah 53:5-6.

¹² John 8:56.

¹³ John 1:29.

So they were both justified. But as is always the case, notice what happens where there is justification. There will always be sanctification. His parents were both sanctified, being sanctified.

Verse six.

“And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.”¹⁴

These people were sincerely, wholeheartedly pursuing obedience to God.

Blamelessly, what does that mean. It means as far as external obedience to God’s law could be measured, they were keeping the law and the statutes. They were walking honestly, conscientiously and consistently in obedience to the instructions that they had been given from the Lord. It doesn’t mean they were sinless. It doesn’t mean they didn’t fail and stumble, but it meant that they were truly, sincerely, honestly, conscientiously walking in God’s Word.

And, by the way, beloved, this is what will always be true when someone has really been justified. There is no such thing as justification that isn’t followed by, accompanied by sanctification. Everyone whom the Lord saves, he is at work then in them moving forward, teaching them obedience to his Word, guiding them in a way that brings glory to himself and conforms them to the image of his Son. This is what God does. This is what salvation results in. And this was true with God’s parents.

I want to ask you this morning. You say you have been justified, are you being sanctified? You say you have believed, you have truly believed in the Lord, well, is your life telling that story? Are we striving honestly, conscientiously, consistently to walk in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord?

The arrival of Jesus didn’t destroy the law. It confirmed it. His presence in a life doesn’t make us lawless. Grace is never an excuse for lawlessness and sin. Where the grace of salvation has arrived, we are being taught to deny ungodliness and to live holy lives right now in the present age. And I warn us, in the love Jesus Christ I warn us that we are living in a day of great compromise even in the Church. We have turned grace into license. We have turned the forgiveness of God into an excuse for indulging our flesh. And that is not what salvation is. Salvation is from sin. It is not so that we might live in sin but that we might not live in it any longer. Where there is justification there will be sanctification. Is that what you see in your life?

In the days of this proud king there was this humble couple who were walking before the Lord in a blameless way.

But notice the next thing we are told about John’s parents, verse seven:

¹⁴ Luke 1:6.

“But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.”¹⁵

It cannot be overemphasized how difficult this was for Elizabeth to be barren. In fact, if you want to know what she felt just look down to verse 25. Actually verse 24, notice.

“After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived.”¹⁶

After the angel delivers this news to Zechariah that they are going to have a son.

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 people.”¹⁷

Here you have this godly couple, but they were living under this reproach because they didn’t have a child, because most people would have thought of her barrenness as a mark of divine disfavor. If you can’t have a son, if you can’t have a child, it must be because of some kind of sin in your life. It must be because in some way the Lord has not favored you.

There were some who would have taken verses like Exodus 23:25 where it said this:

You shall serve the LORD your God, and he will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you. None shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days.¹⁸

Or Deuteronomy 7:14.

“You shall be blessed above all peoples. There shall not be male or female barren among you or among your livestock.”¹⁹

And they would have said, “You see, there is the mark of divine favor, prosperity, fruitfulness.”

If you can’t have a child, there must be something wrong with you. In fact, William Barclay from historical statements around the time makes the case in his commentary that there were seven things that the Jews said meant excommunication from God and the first one that was mentioned was a man who didn’t have a wife or a woman who couldn’t have a child. So it wouldn’t have been everyone who felt this way, but there were many in the land who would have thought of Elizabeth and Zechariah and thought, “There is something wrong with them.”

¹⁵ Luke 1:7.

¹⁶ Luke 1:24.

¹⁷ Luke 1:24-25.

¹⁸ Exodus 23:25-26.

¹⁹ Deuteronomy 7:14.

In fact, there were some who taught this was a legitimate reason for divorce. If your wife couldn't have a child, divorce her.

So think about this godly couple that in the midst of this land where there is this reproach, this pressure that says there is something wrong with you, in fact, some who would have said to Zechariah, "Divorce her." Here they are having lived together serving the Lord in a humble fashion. Now they are advanced in years. Their life is almost over and they have continued to remain together and love each other and love the Lord and serve the Lord despite all of that around them. They cast reproach upon them.

Not only were they childless, verse seven tells us they were both advanced in years. That is, they were past child bearing years.

They had prayed for a child. They had asked the Lord for a child. In fact, we are told in this text that John being born to them was going to be an answer to prayer. Look at verse 12.

And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.
But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John."²⁰

They have prayed. They have asked the Lord for a son, for a child and here they are now past child bearing years. It looks like this prayer is never going to be answered.

Luke chapter one look at verse 18.

"And Zechariah said to the angel, 'How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.'"²¹

This is impossible. Would you give me a sign because I find this incredible?

It was in the days of Herod, King of Judea, the days of this proud maniacal king that the humble King of heaven came into the earth, but before we get to Jesus we look at his forerunner and he was born to humble godly parents.

Notice what this means. Verse eight.

Now while he 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.²²

²⁰ Luke 1:12-13.

²¹ Luke 1:18.

²² Luke 1:8-9.

This is how they would decide what responsibilities they would be given. Large divisions of priests. Many priest on duty during this week. And so they would divide up the responsibilities by lot and on this day this was Zechariah's day. This was the greatest day of his service as a priest, because on this day the lot fell to him that he would be the one to go in just outside of the holy of holies, on the altar of incense, he would be the one who got to offer that incense and that was a one time in your life opportunity. You could only do this once because there were so many priest. You only got to do this one time and, in fact, you may live your entire life and never get to do this.

On this day the lot fell to him. Do you think it was coincidental that the lot fell to him on the very day that the angel was to appear to him and given him this news? Do you see the sovereignty of God? Do you see the providence of God in this day? The lot, right, fell to him. God is sovereignly overseeing all of this and on this is his day to make his way to the altar of incense and here this message would be delivered to him. On this day God's silence would be shattered. For 400 years there has been no special revelation from God. Since the last of the Old Testament prophets there has been silence. But now the Lord would speak. There would be this appearance of the angel.

Verse 10.

“And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.”²³

There would be this offering in the morning and also in the evening. Probably when the Bible tells us the whole multitude of the people were outside that means it was the evening sacrifice and the people were outside and they are praying for the hope of Israel, for the coming of the Messiah, the prosperity of Israel.

Verse 11.

“And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord.”²⁴

We are told later it is Gabriel.

“...standing on the right side of the altar of incense.”²⁵

God is ready to break his silence.

In fact, Zechariah offers a prophecy later on. Look down if you would at verse 67. I just want you to see with your eyes. We are not going to read it all.

This is after the birth of John.

“And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying...”²⁶

²³ Luke 1:10.

²⁴ Luke 1:11.

²⁵ Ibid.

And notice as he gives his prophecy what he says in down in verse 78... let's back up to verse 76.

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.²⁷

What does the coming of the Messiah mean? It means daybreak. It has been darkness. In fact, there is sense in which the whole history of the Jewish people has been one dark night waiting for the appearance of the sun, for the one who will bring salvation and the forgiveness of sins. And the coming of Jesus means the sun has risen.

...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.²⁸

Salvation has come.

Well, where is Zechariah getting this from? Well, from the Lord obviously, but also running through his mind is the Old Testament promise. The book of Malachi, the last book in your Old Testament, Malachi chapter four verse two says this:

But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.²⁹

Or Isaiah chapter nine verse two which says this:

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shined.³⁰

What is Isaiah talking about? He is talking about the appearance of the Son of God.

²⁶ Luke 1:67.

²⁷ Luke 1:76-78.

²⁸ Luke 1:78-29.

²⁹ Malachi 4:2-3.

³⁰ Isaiah 9:2.

In fact, I heard two days ago Benjamin Netanyahu quote Isaiah 9:2 and he interpreted the possibility of this light being peace between Israel and the Palestinians. It gave me goose bumps because I thought to myself, here he is quoting a verse of Scripture he doesn't understand. The light has already been given. The sun has already risen when Jesus came.

So for 400 years there has been silence. But now when you get to Luke chapter one, look back, if you would, please there if you have moved with me. When you get to Luke one and Luke tells us about this angel who is going to speak to Zechariah. The silence has been shattered. This is a day of revelation. This is a day of answered prayer.

As we finish this morning, we return to the original question. And that is: Why does Luke begin here? He is very careful. He is very exact. He is very orderly. Why does he begin here? Why does she begin with John the Baptist?

Let me give you a few reasons. First of all, it demonstrates the continuity of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Realize, when you talk about Christianity, you are not talking about the appearance of a new religion. You are talking about the continuation, the fulfillment of all of the hopes that are found in the Old Testament. Here is a true Israelite. Here is a true worshipper of God and his wife and they are not going to be alone.

We move through Luke we are going to see more of this. Here are true Israelites who have been looking for Jesus. And they understand the true significance of his appearance and they understand it in terms of salvation. This is not something that is different from what they have been expecting. This is the fulfillment of what they have been expecting.

John MacArthur said it well when he said, "Doing so beginning here connects the Old and New Testaments. They do not teach two different religions or propose two different ways of salvation, rather they are one unified revelation from God offering the hope of redemption through faith in the true and living God and his Son the Lord Jesus Christ. Luke is connecting the dots for us. he is saying, "We have picked up where the Old Testament left off."

But there is a second reason he would begin with John the Baptist and that is he is giving us a clear way to identify the Messiah. John's birth is a sign, right? John's birth is miraculous. His mother and father are past child bearing years. They should not be able to have a son. The conception will be foretold by an angel. The power to conceive must be given by God. And then he is going to go on to describe some other things for us so we will be able to recognize that John is truly the forerunner prophesied of in the Old Testament. You see, before he gets to the... all the things that demonstrate the true identity of Jesus, he first wants us to realize the things that identify the true identity of John.

Here is why this is important, because if this John really is the forerunner of the Messiah and we want to know who the Messiah is, all we have to do is listen to John. He is going to identify him for us.

Isn't it wonderful to realize that to recognize that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah doesn't mean that we just have to look at Jesus though there is abundant evidence that tells us this is really is the Son of God, but we also have other signs given to us by God outside of this one's testimony which says to us this really is the Messiah and the first place Luke wants to begin is with his forerunner.

John is going to identify Jesus for us as the Lamb of God.

Third, he would begin with John the Baptist because this is fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Everything that God has promised, God fulfills. Everything that God promises he fulfills.

You remember how he begins in verse one?

“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us...”³¹

Accomplished, fulfilled, finished, completed, accomplished.

God is accomplishing something that he promised. John's birth is an accomplishment.

Malachi 4:1:

For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.

“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. 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, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”³²

I am sending Elijah, God says, before I come.

³¹ Luke 1:1.

³² Malachi 4:1-6.

And Jesus tells us that John is that Elijah.

So this demonstrates the continuity of the Old and New Testaments. And this gives us a clear way to identify Jesus. This is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. This also reminds us that the coming of Christ is welcomed and God's kindness is evident where there is true faith in godliness. God has preserved a remnant of true believing people. And the coming of Jesus won't be lost on them.

Now they will recognize Jesus for who he really is and they will trust in him and they will give praise for him. It may be true that the vast majority of the nation rejects this one as Messiah, but those who are truly godly and walk in the statutes and commandments of the Lord, they are a part of what God is doing and they recognize what God is doing.

And do you know what? God is faithful to them.

Zechariah and Elizabeth tell us that God is kind and faithful to his people. Because here is this couple. They prayed, probably got married very young and they have prayed throughout their entire married life for a child. Specifically they would have desired a son. Specifically they would have had hopes as Israelite women would have that they might be chosen by God to give birth to the Messiah and they have prayed and prayed and prayed and here they are with the sun setting on their lives and they have borne a reproach for their entire married life with no son and God takes them from humility to honor.

Look, you are not just going to get a son. According to the words of Jesus, your son is going to be the greatest human being who has ever lived up to that time. Your son is going to get to pave the way for the Messiah. Your son is going to be the forerunner.

From reproach to the place where to this day we speak favorably and with great honor when we think about Zechariah and Elizabeth. That is God's kindness. They didn't deserve this. This is grace.

From what seems like unanswered prayer, to the knowledge that their prayer has been heard all along. When things seemed the darkest, the sun rose and the light appeared. This is our God. This is whom we worship.

Let's bow together for prayer.

Father in heaven, we thank you for putting your glory on display. We thank you for your kindness and mercy, your faithfulness to your promises and to your people. I thank you that a simple, humble behind the scenes obedient faithful life such as Zechariah and Elizabeth lived, I thank you, Lord, that it is not lost on you. You produce it and then you reward it. And I pray that in this day of great compromise, great lukewarmness, great apathy towards your commandments, in a day when sin is so easily excused and rationalized away, I pray that we would be a people who demonstrate the truth of justification by our patient whole hearted obedient sanctification. Lord, that is your work.

But you call us to cooperate and I pray that we will heed you and hear you and walk in all of your commandments and statutes in an honest sincere fashion. We thank you that our Savior came, that he lived and that he died and that he has been raised. And our hope today, Lord, is for his second coming. And just as the sun rose in obedience to your Word 2000 years ago, so we know that the sun is coming again. I pray that we would live our lives in light of his coming. And we say, Father, in heaven, we say, "Even so, quickly come, Lord Jesus." We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.