

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Luke's Gospel: Prologue, births of John the Baptist and the Lord foretold (Luke 1:1-38)

Today we start a study of Luke's Gospel. There will be four initial talks covering chapters 1 and 2. God willing, we will continue the study in Spring 2016. We trust that a systematic study of this Gospel will be a blessing to all of our listeners.

In the summer of 2013, I had the opportunity of seeing the Lindisfarne Gospels, which were on display in Durham University. What caught my eye were the beautiful illustrations on the cover page of each Gospel. These illustrations depict each of the four living creatures seen in the vision of the glory of God in Revelation 4:6-7. Bible teachers have long recognised that the Gospels can be symbolised in this way. Sequentially in Revelation 4:6-7, these symbols are: a lion, an ox, a face like a man, and a flying eagle. This corresponds to the order of the Gospels in the New Testament. Symbolically then, Christ is presented in Matthew as the King; in Mark, as the Servant; in Luke, the Man and in John, the Son of God. You can readily see how suitable these symbols are!

Luke writes about Jesus as the real Man, through whom the grace of God was manifested. A key verse is Luke 19:10, *"the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost"* (New King James Version). The name 'Son of Man' is used for Adam in Psalm 8:4, where David is speaking about all of Adam's dignity as the first human being created by God. As a doctor, Luke was interested in people and therefore describes what kind of Person the Lord was as a Man - his character and unique human qualities. As Luke describes these features of Jesus to us, we will notice how different Jesus Christ is to all other men. He is God's new Man. *"The first man, [Adam], was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven"* (1 Corinthians 15:47).

Luke wrote his Gospel as a kind of biography of the Lord Jesus to a fellow Greek, a friend of his called Theophilus. Theophilus means "a lover of God". Gentiles like Luke and Theophilus became lovers of God by believing the Gospel message of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. Luke's Gospel reveals this message through the things that Jesus both did and taught (see Acts 1:1).

Let's now read the introduction to Luke: *"Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which are most surely believed among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed"* (Luke 1:1-4).

### How did Luke write his Gospel?

As a doctor, Luke would be used to setting out evidence and facts in an orderly manner. He used this discipline to write down the events of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. But he only did so after a personal, thorough investigation of these facts. *"I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning"* (Luke 1:3, New International Version). His desire was to verify *"the things most surely believed"* (Luke 1:1, King James Version) by the first century Christians. That is, those things which had been fulfilled amongst them. Therefore, he *"searched out diligently and followed all things closely and traced accurately the course [of the life of Christ] from the highest to the smallest detail from the very first"* (Luke 1:3, Amplified Bible).

### Where did Luke get his information from?

To where or to whom did his research take him back? It took him to the disciples who had lived with, and followed, the Lord throughout His earthly ministry - *"those who from the beginning [of His ministry] were eyewitnesses"* (Luke 1:2, New King James Version). They handed down or passed on their accounts by verbally ministering the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit.

### When did Luke meet these eyewitnesses?

Most probably, they would have met each other during the two years, or so, Luke stayed in Caesarea whilst Paul was in prison there awaiting trial (Acts 23:23-27:1). That is, it was towards the end of Paul's ministry, 60-62 AD. By then Christianity had become established throughout the world. This is reflected in Luke's Gospel. For example, the emphasis on discipleship during the period of the Lord's absence (see, Luke 12:35-48, 17:22-18:8 and 19:11-27).

### Why did Luke go to such extents as these?

His purpose was so that Theophilus and all others, including ourselves, who have believed the Gospel "*may know the full truth and understand with certainty and security against error the accounts (histories) and doctrines of the faith of which you have been informed and in which you have been orally instructed*" (Luke 1:4, Amplified Bible). This is important to us. I once heard the question master on Radio 4's Question Time throw back a Christian lady's question about the accuracy of Scripture by asking her, "Do you think the Bible is true?" "Yes", she replied, and cited the precise historical details concerning Christ's birth given in Luke 2:1-2 as an example. That replied so shocked him and took him aback that he hastily moved onto the next questioner!

### Summary

To summarise the prologue to Luke's Gospel:

- Luke painstakingly researched all of his material.
- He personally heard it from the eyewitnesses, Christ's own disciples whom he interviewed.
- He wrote down what they said. They orally transmitted the Word of God to him and their words were transformed into a Spirit-given record.
- He gave an orderly account of the Lord's life, in a kind of spiritual and moral order which would appeal to the Greek mind (Greek philosophy of those times was much about 'the ideal man').
- He wrote down a full account of the Lord's ministry. In this respect, Luke is the only Gospel writer who records every one of those seven crucial events of Christ's life: His birth; His baptism; His temptations; His transfiguration; His death; His resurrection; His ascension.
- He wrote to a Gentile believer, who had not seen the Lord and who needed to be sure as to the facts of the Faith he had believed. We also need to be certain of the trustworthiness of the Gospel!

### The birth of John the Baptist is foretold

Luke begins his narrative by relating the events surrounding Christ's birth. In his orderly way, he explains the condition of the nation of Israel at that point in their history. Many centuries before, the exiles had returned from Babylon but their initial spiritual zeal had been lost over subsequent generations. It had been four hundred years since God had spoken to them through the prophet Malachi. The spiritual state of the nation is presented in Luke 1:5 - the wicked Herod the Great was the reigning king of Judea! He was an Idumean, that is, a descendant of Esau - a foreigner and an enemy of Israel. And the nation was also under Roman rule. It seemed that Israel's Messianic hope had been long-forgotten about! It is at this point that Luke introduces the parents of John the Baptist, who was the forerunner of the Lord.

Zacharias, which means 'the Lord remembers', was a priest belonging to the division of Abijah, one of the twenty-four shifts into which the Jewish priesthood had been divided by David (see 1 Chronicles 24:7-18). Each shift served in the temple of Jerusalem twice a year for a week, from Sabbath to Sabbath. Elizabeth, which means 'the oath of God', was also of the priestly family of Aaron. Luke 1:6 informs us that she and her husband were "*both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blameless.*" They were a godly couple who, together with others such as Simeon and Anna (see Luke 2:25-38), formed part of the faithful remnant of Israel. Malachi had written about such. "*Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, And the LORD listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who meditate on His name*" (Malachi 3:16).

But Zacharias and Elizabeth were childless, a reproachful condition amongst the Jews. The cause of this was Elizabeth's barrenness and their problem was aggravated by the fact that they were both beyond the age of having children. However, the Lord had heard their prayers. One day Zacharias was performing his priestly duties in the temple (Luke 1:8). The privilege of burning incense in the Holy Place had fallen by lot to him (Luke 1:9). This was a special day in his life. There were so many priests at that time that such a privilege came only once in a lifetime, if at all. The people had gathered to pray "at the hour of incense" outside the temple - in its courts. (Luke's Gospel opens with people praying at the temple; but it ends with the disciples praising God at the temple.)

Suddenly, Gabriel, an angel of the Lord appeared on the right side of the altar and terrified Zacharias (Luke 1:11-12). But the angel reassured him with the wonderful news that Elizabeth would bear a son, who was to be named John (Luke 1:13). (John means the favour or grace of Jehovah.) In addition to bringing joy and gladness to his parents, he would be the rejoicing of many in Israel, because he would be great in the sight of the Lord (Luke 1:14-15). John the Baptist was to be a Nazarite, who would drink neither wine (made from grapes) nor strong drink (made from grain) see Luke 1:15). Secondly, he would be spiritually endowed - filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15). That is, God's Spirit was in control of him from the outset to prepare him for his special mission as Christ's forerunner. In his very important role as herald of the Messiah, John the Baptist would turn many of the Jewish people back to the Lord (Luke 1:16). The angel Gabriel identified him as the one prophesied by Malachi in Malachi 4:5-6: *"He will also 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 a people prepared for the Lord"*, (Luke 1:17). Like the prophet Elijah, John would seek to bring the people into right relationship with God through true repentance. Thus they would be ready to receive the Lord Jesus when He appeared. Luke records how John fulfilled this prophecy in Luke 3:3-6. *"He went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough ways smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"*

In Luke 1:6, 9, 11, 15, 16 and 17, "the Lord" is equivalent to "Jehovah" in the Old Testament. So the advent of the Messiah is the advent of Jehovah! In Luke 1:16, Gabriel said that John would *"turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God."* The inference then is clear. Jesus is God and this is confirmed in Romans 10:9 and 13, where Romans 10:13 is a quotation from Joel 2:32. *"If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thine heart that God has raised him from among the dead, thou shalt be saved ... For every one whosoever, who shall call on the name of the Lord, shall be saved"* (JN Darby Translation).

But Zacharias was convinced that both he and his wife were too old to become the parents of a child and asked the angel how he could be sure of this revelation (Luke 1:18). The angel answered that he was one who stands in the presence of God and who is sent from Him to bring messages from God to men (Luke 1:19). Gabriel said that because Zacharias had doubted, he would know the message was true in that he would lose the power of speech until his son was born (Luke 1:20). Meanwhile, the people were waiting impatiently outside (Luke 1:21). They wondered why Zacharias was taking so long to do his duty. When Zacharias finally did come out, he was speechless and could only communicate with them by making signs (Luke 1:22). Then they realised *"that he had seen a vision in the temple"* (Luke 1:22).

When his temple service was completed, he went back home and soon afterwards Elizabeth conceived, as the angel had predicted (Luke 1:23). After Elizabeth became pregnant she went into seclusion in her home for five months, rejoicing within herself that the Lord had looked upon her and had taken away the reproach of being childless (Luke 1:24-25).

### **The Lord's birth foretold**

In the sixth month after his appearance to Zacharias and after Elizabeth became pregnant, Gabriel reappeared. But this time to a virgin named Mary who lived in a city of Galilee called Nazareth (Luke 1:26). Mary was engaged, that is, betrothed, to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David, (Luke 1:27) a fact which becomes important in Luke 2:4, when Jesus was due to be born. Betrothal, in the Jewish culture of that time, was considered a much more binding contract than engagement is in today's world. In fact, it could be broken only by a legal decree similar to divorce.

The angel addressed Mary as one who the Lord was visiting with special privilege. The angel came into her house and said to her, *"Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!"* (Luke 1:28, New King James Version); Mary was understandably troubled by this greeting (Luke 1:29). Unlike Zacharias, she was not fazed at seeing an angel! As she considered what Gabriel had announced, she simply wondered what it all meant. Gabriel calmed her fears by telling her that she had found favour with God (Luke 1:30). Then he told her that God had chosen her to be the mother of Israel's long-awaited Messiah. *"Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give 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"* (Luke 1:31-33).

Gabriel announced some important Gospel truths in his greeting:

1. The real humanity of the Messiah - *"you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son and shall call His name Jesus"* (Luke 1:31), a Jewish name in common use. *"When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law"* (Galatians 4:4).
2. Jesus' deity and His mission as Saviour - *"you will ... bring forth a Son and shall call His name Jesus."* Jesus means 'Jehovah is the Saviour'.
3. His essential greatness, both as to His Person and His work - *"He will be great"* (Luke 1:32) in everything He does and says; and in every office He fulfils for God His Father.
4. His true, personal, unique identity as being "the Son" (Luke 1:32). God's own Son revealed in flesh - *"[He] will be called the Son of the Highest"* (Luke 1:32).
5. His right and title to the throne of King David - *"the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David"*, (Luke 1:32) words which establish Him as the Messiah (see Psalm 2:6-9).
6. His everlasting and universal kingdom - *"He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end"* (Luke 1:33)
7. Gabriel gave no hint of anything outside of Old Testament promises. As far as his message is concerned the reign of the Son of the Highest might be immediate. However, in retrospect, we can now distinguish between the first and second advents of Messiah. Luke 1:31-32a refer to Christ's First Advent, whereas Luke 1:32b-33 describe His Second Coming as King of kings and Lord of lords.

A difficulty occurred in Mary's mind, which she expressed as a question in Luke 1:34. *"How can this be?"* was a question of wonder but, unlike Zacharias, not of doubt. How could she bear a child when she had never had any sexual relations with a man? The angel answered with words which describe how her virgin birth would occur. *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God"* (Luke 1:35). The utterances of Gabriel in Luke 1:35-36 are the doctrines of the virgin birth. Her conception of the Child, who had David as His ancestor and yet who was also to be the Son of the Highest, would be a miracle of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would "come upon" Mary, that is, God would be the Father of her child. Therefore her baby could be called "the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Here then we have the God-given revelation of the incarnation. Mary's Son would be God manifest in the flesh. Language cannot exhaust the mystery that is shrouded here. And *"the power of [God would] overshadow"* (Luke 1:35) her so that the foetus in Mary would be protected and nourished by the Holy Spirit Himself. Hence, when the baby Jesus was born, He was in every way a perfect, sinless human being. The Holy Spirit filled John the Baptist even from his mother's womb; but the Holy Spirit indwelt the Lord Jesus as a Man, even in Mary's womb. What seemed impossible by human reasoning, Mary's problem of "How?", God's answer was *"by the Holy Spirit"* (Luke 1:35). *"For with God nothing will be impossible"* (Luke 1:37).

Our study ends today at the point in the narrative where Luke records that the angel, Gabriel then broke the news to Mary that a relative of hers, Elizabeth, was six months into her pregnancy. Mary did not respond with any objections. In contrast to Zacharias, she did not question Gabriel. She simply accepted by faith his words that Elizabeth, who had been known to be unable to have children, was now pregnant. This other miracle served to reassure Mary that with God nothing is ever impossible (see Luke 1:37). In beautiful submission, Mary yielded herself to the Lord for the accomplishment of His wondrous purposes. This is seen in her response to all that Gabriel had told her. *"Then Mary said, 'Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.' And the angel departed from her"* (Luke 1:38).

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