

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Luke's Gospel: Events surrounding the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:39-80)

Today we continue in our study of Luke's Gospel. In the first talk we looked at "the foretelling of the births of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Christ". Today we are looking at "the events around the time of the birth of John the Baptist", from Luke 1:39 to Luke 1:80, the end of the chapter. In the next two talks in the series, we will consider Luke 2 under the titles - "the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ" and "the Lord's childhood".

Last week we as we studied the first part of the chapter, we were introduced to two couples: Zacharias and Elizabeth and Joseph and Mary, who were chosen by God to be the parents of two great men, John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Christ. Now even as I say this, I feel the need to quote the words of John himself in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ when he said, *"He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose"* John 1:27. So although Luke mentions Zacharias, Elizabeth and John first in his Gospel, then afterwards, Joseph and Mary - it is Jesus Christ who is the subject of his Gospel! John was the one chosen to be the herald and forerunner but again in his own words concerning Christ, *"He must increase, but I must decrease"*, John 3:30.

Care needs to be taken, too, as we speak of the "parents" of Jesus. Joseph and Mary were not married and there had been no sexual relationship between them when Mary fell pregnant with her firstborn Son! The conception of her Baby was by the Holy Spirit, otherwise being a 'just man' Joseph would have put her away, breaking their betrothal. We read, *"But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins"*, Matthew 1:20-21. So when we speak of the "parents" of Jesus, we need to understand that Mary was a virgin and that Joseph had no part in the conception. It is interesting that while we read of Mary thorough the Lord's life and after His death, it would seem that Joseph died before the public ministry of the Lord began. It's almost as if having an 'earthly' father in the picture could have been a distraction and a source of misunderstanding in relation to the Lord's teaching when He spoke of His Father, the One He had come to declare!

The passage we are considering today from Luke 1:39-80, splits into three main events or sections.

1. Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth, and her song - Luke 1:39-56.
2. The birth of John the Baptist - Luke 1:57-66; and
3. Zacharias' prophecy - Luke 1:67-80.

1. Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth, and her song - Luke 1:39-56

Much of the detail surrounding the events of this chapter is only given by Luke. Of the Gospel writers, only Luke tells us about the angelic visit to Zacharias and the message given (Luke 1:5-25). Likewise, only Luke tells us of the visit of the archangel Gabriel to Mary and the message given to her (Luke 1:26-38). And only Luke tells us of the events we have in the passage we are looking at today: Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56); the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:57-66); and the prophecy of John's father, Zacharias (Luke 1:67-80).

After receiving the angelic message concerning her favour with God and the wonderful news that she had been chosen by God to give birth to the Holy Child Jesus, Mary was puzzled and asked, *"How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?"* (Luke 1:34) This was a perfectly natural and reasonable question for her to ask in the circumstances, and when the answer came, she replied, *"Be it unto me according to thy word"* (Luke 1:38), which shows her readiness to believe by faith the promise given to her. Our study begins today in Luke 1:39 and it's interesting that we read that following the angelic message, Mary very quickly (and perhaps without reference to Joseph) went to see her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth had concealed her pregnancy for five months and it would have been a very natural thing for Mary to want to see her. But Elizabeth and her husband Zacharias were *"both righteous before God"* (Luke 1:6), Zacharias being a priest (Luke 1:5) and Elizabeth, too, being a descendant of Aaron (Luke 1:5) and I am inclined to think that she went deliberately to them to share the great news she had received from the angel Gabriel. It would take faith to believe her story that she was pregnant but that she was still a virgin! Zacharias and Elizabeth believed by faith and rejoiced with her, but I'm sure there would have been many who would not believe Mary's story and it isn't

hard to imagine the speculation, gossip and ridicule she would have faced by those who wouldn't believe what she said the angel told her. Even today we need to be reminded that *"with God nothing is impossible"* (Luke 1:37). It has been well put, "Faith sees the invisible, believes the incredible and receives the impossible."

I mentioned that we don't read about Joseph in these verses, which is perhaps not surprising and would cause us to believe that the angelic message to Mary was much earlier than the angelic message spoken to Joseph in Matthew 1:18-25). Mary was given the promise of the child prior to her becoming pregnant, whilst Joseph was given the explanation as to why she was pregnant. Given that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months (Luke 1:56), I would suggest that there would have been quite some time between the two angelic messages. It's also interesting to note that there is no mention in the Gospel record of the grandparents of the Lord, apart from the names as recorded in the genealogies (Matthew 1:1-17, Luke 3:23-38). In Matthew 1:1-17, we get the father of Joseph, Jacob and his descendants traced back through David to Abraham and in Luke 3:23-38 we get the father-in-law of Joseph (Mary's father), Heli and his descendants traced back through David and Abraham, to Adam. These genealogies are very important to establish Matthew's presentation of Christ as the King, (both parents being in the royal line of David), and Luke's presentation of Christ as the Son of Man, (you'll notice that Mary's genealogy goes all the way back to the first man, Adam). But as I said, it is very interesting that there are no further references to the grandparents of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Heavenly Man!

In Luke 1:41-43 we read, *"And it came to pass, that, when Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: and she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"*

What a wonderful reception Mary received from her cousin whose words were spoken under the control of the Holy Spirit. She said, *"Blessed art thou among women..."* (Luke 1:42), and sometimes I feel that perhaps as a result of the masses who idolise Mary, we underestimate just how special she was! It was the hope of every young Jewish woman to bear the Messiah and the fact that Mary was chosen certainly sets her apart. Elizabeth also calls her *"the mother of my Lord"* (Luke 1:43) and so she was. However, the many names she has been given over the years including "the Mother of God" and "the Queen of Heaven" etc. are not scriptural and it's worth noting as Mary begins her song (Luke 1:46-55) she does so by magnifying the Lord and rejoicing in God her Saviour. Although she is a very special person, she was a sinner who rejoiced in the salvation of the Lord. I say this not to belittle Mary, but to emphasise that the only sinless, perfect person who has ever lived in this world was the Son whom Mary bore, the Lord Jesus Christ. There have been many great men and women, but in all things He must have the preeminence! (see Colossians 1:18) However much respect we have for great men and women, we must never allow our admiration of them to become worship, which alone is due to God.

God alone is to receive our worship, praise and our prayers. In Acts 10:25-26, the Apostle Peter refused to be worshipped as did the Apostle Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:14-16. In Revelation 22:8-9, we read that when the Apostle John fell down and would have worshipped the angel, the command was, *"See thou do it not"*. The Apostle Paul also reminds us in his letter to Timothy that *"There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all..."* (1 Timothy 2:5-6). We have no scriptural warrant for addressing any save God in our prayers. The New Testament pattern is that we address God the Father through the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. When we address the Lord Jesus in prayer, we do so in His own Name and in the power of the Holy Spirit. We suggest that there is no scriptural example of anyone addressing the Holy Spirit in prayer, although we need to remember that God is a triune of three Persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

From Luke 1:46-55 we have the words Mary spoke commonly referred to as "The Magnificat" (which is from the Latin word for magnify). These are beautiful verses and if we had the time we would read them together. I wonder, how often do we find ourselves magnifying the Lord? I'm not just talking of when we meet together with other believers, which of course is wonderful, but how often during our everyday lives do we magnify the Lord? These verse show us that Mary had a great knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures (I have read that there are at least 15 quotes or allusions in this song of Mary taken from the Old Testament Scriptures). In our worship and praise to our God, it is good if we can use scriptural quotations and expressions to convey what is in our hearts. I believe that we are greatly helped by the many godly hymn writers who have penned words, which readily come to our minds and which help us magnify the Lord. These lovely words of Mary not only show that she knew the Scriptures, but they show that her heart was right! Of course it's valuable to know and study the Bible, but we need to ensure that we keep ourselves in the love of God and that our hearts are in a condition where praise and worship readily rises to God. Mary understood what was happening to her, and as we read in Luke 2:19 these were the things which she *"kept and pondered in her heart."*

As Christians, how we should desire to have the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit displayed in our lives day by day. The words of the Lord Himself are instructive when He says in John 4:14 (to the woman of Samaria), *"But*

whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into eternal life." And again in John 7:37-38 (when He cries to the crowd, saying), *"If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water."* If the Holy Spirit and the Word of God have the primary place in our hearts, there is no doubt that there will be a springing up (to God) and a flowing out (to men) in our lives.

It would appear that Mary stayed with her cousin Elizabeth and her husband Zacharias for three months until John was just about to be born, before she returned to her own home (see Luke 1:56).

2. The birth of John the Baptist - Luke 1:57-66

From Luke 1:57-66 we have the story of the birth of John the Baptist. The time came for Elizabeth, this godly woman, to have her son and there was much joy and rejoicing at his birth. It was expected that he would be called after his father, Zacharias, but Elizabeth said he was to be called John (Luke 1:60). Now John means, 'Jehovah has been gracious' or 'the Lord gave', so what better name could there have been to call the child! However, as we know from the earlier verses in the chapter, it was the angel who had told Zacharias that the child was to be called John (Luke 1:13). Remember, Zacharias was still unable to speak as a result of his unbelief (see Luke 1:20) so he wrote on a writing table (possibly a slate), *"His name is John"* (Luke 1:63). So the matter was settled; both he and Elizabeth had been obedient to the word of God spoken by the angel, and immediately Zacharias' mouth was opened, his tongue was loosed and he spoke, and praised God (Luke 1:64). Zacharias had been dumb for nine months, unable to speak as a result of his unbelief. He was like Thomas, to whom the Lord said, *"Because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, yet have believed"* (see John 20:24-29). Perhaps in both Zacharias and Thomas we get a picture of the Jewish nation who "required a sign" as the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 1:22. Men today say, "Seeing is believing", but the Lord says we are blessed if we believe by faith! Again the Apostle tells us that, *"We walk by faith, not by sight"*, 2 Corinthians 5:7.

3. Zacharias' prophecy - Luke 1:67-80

In the final part of the chapter (from Luke 1:67-80) we get the prophecy of Zacharias. What is interesting is that his prophecy (under the guidance of the Holy Spirit) is not about his son, John, but about the Christ who was to come through Mary's womb. We would judge that only Luke 1:76, 77 and 80 are in connection with John the Baptist whilst the greater part of the prophecy is about our Lord Jesus Christ.

Before we look at the prophecy concerning Christ, let us read the verses which are spoken about John. *"And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; to give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins ... And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel"* (Luke 1:76-77, 80)

Later in the Gospel the Lord Jesus said, *"Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: ..."* (Luke 7:28) Need we say more concerning this special servant of God! We read of his birth, his lifestyle, his preaching, his baptising (he it was who baptised the Lord in the river Jordan), and his death (at the hand of Herod). His cry to the unbelieving nation of Israel was, *"Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"* (see Matthew 3:2), and the godly in Israel responded to his preaching. This was why the Lord was baptised by John (Matthew 3:13-17, Luke 3:21-22); He wanted to be identified with the remnant of godly ones separated out from amongst a faithless nation. As the forerunner and "porter" (see John 10:3), John's great joy was to be able to see Jesus coming to him and announce, *"Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world"*, John 1:29.

Returning to Zacharias' prophecy we find that he begins by saying, *"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people."* He continues speaking in the past tense declaring what the Lord had done and beautiful expressions of redemption, salvation and deliverance flow from his lips. We can see that he was speaking under the control of the Holy Spirit as he was anticipating the fulfilment of all these Old Testament promises in the Christ who was about to come into the world.

After speaking about his son John (as we have already considered) in Luke 1:76-77, he again prophesies (in the past tense) about the new day that was about to dawn when the *"dayspring from on high"* (Luke 1:78) would visit this world, to give *"light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace"* (Luke 1:79). What a remarkable prophecy which speaks of both the first and second advent of Christ! This perspective was lacking in the understanding of the believers of that period. You'll remember the two disciples on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:13-49) who were downcast after the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus because they were looking for the redemption of Israel at that time (Luke 24:31). How graciously the Lord spoke to them, opening their understanding to the fact that He would have to suffer "these things" before entering into His glory (Luke 24:36).

With the light of the New Testament Scriptures, we can see that whilst Luke 1:78-79 speak of Jesus' birth, Luke 1:68-75 look forward to a day still future when Christ will rule in this world. I know some would teach that God will fulfil His promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Church, but that would only serve to rob Israel (God's chosen earthly people) of their blessing. We believe that after the Church is raptured to heaven, God will complete His work with His ancient people and Christ will rule in His kingdom for 1,000 years on this earth. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess Jesus as Lord! Ours is the blessed privilege to bow before Him and confess Him as our Lord now.

May God bless you all.

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