

Introduction and John the Baptist's Birth Announced

Luke 1:1–25

Luke 1:1-4: Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, 3 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, 4 that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.

Background Notes

Luke addressed both his Gospel and the book of Acts to “Theophilus.” Who was “Theophilus”? We don’t know! His name means “friend of God,” and the title “most excellent” indicates that he may have been a Roman official. It would seem that Theophilus was a new Christian. One of the Luke’s purposes in writing this Gospel was to confirm Theophilus’ faith, and to show both him and us that the Christian faith rests on solid, historical fact (v4) - “*that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.*”

Verses 1-2 tell us that between the time that the Gospel events took place and the time that the Gospels were written, a lot of records were kept and written down. This time period was not just a big blank of time in which people’s memories were failing and stories were being exaggerated and miracles were being made up! Skeptics of the Bible teach this, but **no**, the time period between the events and the written Gospels was definitely **not** like that!

From the document evidence that’s available today, we now know that the time gap between the events and when the first Gospel was written (either Mathew or Mark) was only about fifteen years! Luke tells us, and the evidence supports this, that there were many eyewitness accounts right from the beginning, starting with birth of John the Baptist. There were both written and oral sources that the Gospel writers could draw from when they wrote their Gospels under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Of course Mathew and John were themselves eyewitnesses of the events in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Verse 3 tells us that Luke took the time to investigate everything carefully and thoroughly before he wrote his Gospel. Where and when did Luke do this research? Luke did not live in Israel -- he was from the area of Troas in Asia. So where and when did Luke interview all these eyewitnesses? Most likely it was during the two years that Paul was in prison at Caesarea, a coastal city in Israel, before Luke accompanied with Paul to Rome. From evidence in the Book of Acts, we know that Luke was in Israel during this time. He probably used this time wisely to interview the apostles and other

eyewitnesses, and to check up on all the sources available -- down to the last detail. Praise the Lord for people like Dr. Luke, and for other believers who give attention to details for the glory of God!

Doctrinal Points

1. The birth of John the Baptist was an answer to prayer.

Verses 5-13: There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. 7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. 8 So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, 9 according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. 10 And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. 11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

The "Herod" who is mentioned in verse 5 is known as "Herod the Great." However, the Bible doesn't call him "Herod the Great" -- only secular history gives him this title. This "Herod" was known in the Bible only as the king who killed the babies in Bethlehem.

However, there is someone who is called "great" in this chapter: John the Baptist! Verse 15: *"for he shall be great in the sight of the Lord."* John the Baptist is called "great" because of his commitment to the Lord and his service to the Lord. Verse 16: *"And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God."* What a lesson for us, if we want to be considered "great" in God's eyes!

In verse 5, we learned that a certain priest named Zachariah was of the division of Abia. Ever since the time of David's reign, the many priests of Israel were divided into twenty-four divisions. The priests carried out the priestly responsibilities in the Temple in appointed orders. Each day one priest from the division of priests on duty was chosen by lot to go into the Holy Place of the Temple and burn incense on the golden altar of incense. This was considered a special privilege for the priest, because some priests never received this opportunity.

It so happened that on this particular day the lot fell to Zachariah, but this was certainly not by chance! To Zachariah's surprise, an angel of the Lord appeared while he was standing by the altar of incense. Zachariah probably thought that he was going to experience the judgment of God for something he had done wrong! (Wouldn't that have been your reaction?) But to Zachariah's further surprise, the angel said, "Don't be afraid! Your prayers for a son have been

answered!" Wow! Zachariah had just about given up hope for a child. He and his wife were old, and his wife Elizabeth was barren.

Notice the prayer lesson for us here. **Don't give up hope!** God can still answer your long-term prayers. And notice that God's answer came as Zachariah was going about his God-given responsibilities. That should be our pattern as well. The birth of John the Baptist was an answer to prayer.

2. The birth of John the Baptist was a fulfillment of prophecy.

In verses 14-17, the angel continued: *And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. 15 For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 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."*

Prior to this time, no prophet had arisen and spoken in Israel for 400 years! Four hundred years before the coming of John the Baptist, the prophet Malachi had prophesied that a great prophet would come as a forerunner to the Messiah. Malachi 4:5-6 - *"Behold, I send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers."* Luke quoted this prophecy in verse 17, indicating that the ministry of John the Baptist would be in the spirit and power of Elijah. What a powerful ministry John the Baptist had, as the forerunner of Christ!

Referring to this prophecy, in Matthew 17 the Lord said that the prophecy of Malachi also has an end time fulfillment. Before the Lord returns, in the Day of the Lord, a prophet will come in the spirit and power of Elijah. It may be that Elijah himself will be one the "two witnesses" mentioned in Revelation 11. (Remember -- Elijah never died.) In any case, in Luke 1 we learn that the ministry of John the Baptist would be in the spirit and power of Elijah. He would rebuke the people, and many of them would turn back to the Lord and to the values and commands of Scripture. The birth of John the Baptist was a fulfillment of prophecy.

3. The birth of John the Baptist was a test of faith.

Verses 18-25: And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years." 19 And the angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. 20 But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time." 21 And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple. 22 But when he came out, he could not

speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless. 23 So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house. 24 Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying, 25 “Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”

The idea in that last phrase, “to take away my reproach among people,” is that the cultural stigma of being barren, or having no children, would be removed. In that culture, being childless was thought by many to be the judgment of God.

The birth of John the Baptist was a great blessing to Zachariah and Elizabeth (and to the entire world as well) -- but it was also a test of faith. First, it was a test of faith for Zachariah -- and he failed. Zachariah dared to ask Gabriel for a sign that this word from the Lord was true, and that the birth was really going to happen. Zachariah was granted a sign all right, but it was not quite what he was hoping for! The angel told him that he would be unable to speak until John was born.

Do you see the lesson for us here? We need to be careful about asking God for signs. Asking for a sign is an indication of doubt, a weak faith, and even unbelief. Because of his unbelief, Zachariah was mute until the child John was born.

The birth of John the Baptist a test for the faith of Zachariah, and as John the Baptist began his ministry, the faith of the nation of Israel would be tested as well. Would the people turn back to the Lord and prepare for the coming of the Messiah? The birth of John the Baptist was a test of faith.

Practical Application

Don't lose your testimony because of doubts!

Don't lose your testimony because of doubts! There is a great spiritual lesson in the fact of Zachariah being unable to speak because of his doubts and unbelief. When we doubt the Word of God, our testimony is affected before the watching world! We are unable to speak with power and conviction to the people around us. Many of them are waiting for us to say something, just as the people were waiting in anticipation outside the Temple in Zachariah's day.

Do you have doubts about the Christian faith? About your salvation? About the Lord's ability? You can be sure that these doubts are affecting your testimony.

What should we do when we encounter doubts in our lives as believers? Go to the Lord about these doubts! Don't ask for signs – simply ask the Lord to clear up these doubts in His own way. And pray that your testimony would remain strong! Don't lose your testimony because of doubts.