

Certainty!

Good News of Great Joy - Part 1

Luke 1

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for December 6, 2020

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Summary: Even before the world heard Jesus' first cry, long before Jesus took his first earthly breath, God was displaying his providence to those in need. As told by Luke in his gospel account, God's faithfulness extended first to a lowly priest of God, named Zechariah. God's faithfulness to this humble servant is the same faithfulness that He displayed with the gift of his Son, and is the same faithfulness that He offers to us today.

If I were to ask you which inspired author provided the most content of the New Testament, you would probably guess the apostle Paul. He penned 13 letters or epistles in the New Testament. But no, it wasn't Paul.

If you then guessed the Apostle John — who wrote The Gospel of John, The Book of Revelation and three short letters, 1st, 2nd and 3rd John, you'd be wrong again.

One New Testament author, who wasn't even an apostle, but an uncircumcised Gentile physician, happened to write the most text of the New Testament — in a 2-volume best seller.

His name is Luke.

Volume 1 of his two-part series is called The Gospel of Luke, and Volume 2 is called The Book of Acts.

In sheer volume alone, 25% of the content of the New Testament was written by this converted doctor.

Bruce Larson, *The Communicator's Commentary: Volume 3* (Word Publishers, 1983), p. 13

Each of these two volumes was written to an imperial official — given the term “excellent, or you could render it, “your excellency” — the same term Paul used when addressing two different governors, in Acts 23 and Acts 26.

David E. Garland, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 55

In the second volume, Luke writes in Acts chapter 1 and verse 1:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up.

Acts 1:1-2a

And from that point, Volume 2 reveals the details behind the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the creation of the New Testament church age and the early actions of the apostles.

Back in Luke's Gospel, at the outset of this two-volume series, Luke tells Theophilus exactly why he was moved to compile it; verse 1 begins:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, 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, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

Luke 1:1-4

Luke was the traveling companion of the Apostle Paul and it's obvious because what I just read is actually one long sentence!

And the key word to the purpose statement of Dr. Luke is this word **certainty** — **that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.**



Discussion Question

Theophilus, I want you to be certain; to fully understand; to grasp with assurance, the gospel.

Now it happens to be a wonderful coincidence that this man's name is Theophilus, which means "friend of God" and is applicable to every believer since then and up to this very moment.

Ibid, p. 56

We are, by faith in Jesus — whom Luke will stress in his gospel account as a real man, 100 percent deity, yes, but 100 percent human — by faith in the God-man, we have become not only the children of God, but the friends of God.

Luke wants the believer to develop a foundation for their faith and the evidence to encourage their faith during these uncertain times.

He says here that he's examined the testimonies of eyewitnesses; he has reviewed his notes from interviews with the apostles and hundreds of believers who had seen the Lord and walked with Him and heard Him preach and perform miracles.

In fact, he uses a word for interviewing these eyewitness found nowhere else in the New Testament — the Greek word

autoptes (αυτοπτης) from which we get our word, autopsy.

Ibid, p. 24

Dr. Luke is carefully examining the historical record — compiling, arranging and diagnosing all the facts and historical markers along the way.

Listen, Christianity has never once said, “Close your eyes, turn off your thinking cap and try to believe it.”

Adapted from [Life Application Bible: Luke](#) (Tyndale, 1997), p. 2

No, Christianity says, “Check out the evidence; look at the autopsy reports of careful analysis; look at this man; His birth, life, death and resurrection. Look at Him in all His perfection and glory — and believe.”



Discussion Question

This is the God who came into our cluttered and chaotic and condemned world; the God-man who said in **Luke 19:10: *The Son of Man came to seek and to save those who are lost.***

Frankly, I can't think of a better time to rehearse the truths about Jesus Christ, and the gospel of Christ, and the claims of Christ than in these days of chaos and clutter, when Jesus is being erased from the pages of our world.

Let's allow this gospel account to do what Tertullian said it did to the Christians living just 50 years or so after the death of Luke. Tertullian wrote that “Luke's Gospel renewed their faith” — it reinvigorated; it refreshed the faith of the believer.

Adapted from William Hendriksen, [Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke](#) (Baker Book House, 1978), p. 7

Now, in order to do that, you would think Luke would dive immediately into the narrative of Jesus's birth.

But Dr. Luke isn't in a hurry — he's going to write the longest book in the New Testament.

Charles R. Swindoll, [Insights on Luke](#) (Zondervan, 2012), p. 17

And he's going to begin by introducing two people who had every reason to be lagging in their faith, defeated and discouraged — and they, in fact, were discouraged.

While the culture and context changes between the first century and the 21st century, the truths that develop certainty in our faith have not changed at all.

Let me take you through this opening section by pointing out at least three unchangeable truths for every heart that needs to be renewed and refreshed today.

Even when God's authority seems unimportant, He is still in control.

Notice how this Gospel account begins in verse 5:

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest

named Zechariah.

Luke 1:5a

In the days of Herod, there was a priest.

You could write into the margin of your notes, “what a terrible time to be a priest.” In fact, what a terrible time to live in this part of the world and try to walk with God.

This is Herod the Great on the throne. Placed in power nearly 40 years before this chapter opens; proud, wicked and brutal.

He will kill three of his sons in order to keep them from mounting the throne which he guarded jealously. His favorite title was “King of the Jews,” which is about to be threatened.

Herod had nine or ten wives — we’re not even sure, although we know he executed one of them for no apparent reason.

Warren W. Wiersbe, *Luke Volume 1: Be Compassionate* (Victor Books, 1988), p. 10

Add to this the fact that the religious leadership was corrupt; shackled to traditions; rebellious in their hearts against God’s word.

God no longer mattered in the political realm and the religious realm. He was considered unimportant and irrelevant.

To be living during the reign of Herod was bad enough, and to be a priest in a corrupt religious system only made it worse.

Luke is setting the scene to reteach this unchangeable truth — and Zechariah

happens to be clinging to this life preserver; even when God seems irrelevant, He is still in control.

Even when God’s seems absent, He is still aware of every sorrow.

Notice verse 5 again:

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.

Luke 1:5

Stop here for a moment.

During these days, the priesthood was made up of several thousand men who were placed into 24 divisions; they served for a week at a time at different times during the year.

Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: Volume 1* (Crossway Books, 1998), p. 19

Luke tells us that Zechariah was in the division of Abijah, which meant he lived outside of Jerusalem. This division was fairly insignificant in the larger scheme of religious power. These priests were not among the well-connected in the religious world; they lived out in what we would call the country.

More than likely, he was farming on the side to make ends meet.

He has been faithfully married for many decades now to Elizabeth. Luke tells us

here that she was a direct descendant of Aaron, Israel's first high priest.

And they both loved God — notice their testimony as Luke describes it in **verse 6**:

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

Luke 1:6

Don't think for a moment that Luke is describing perfect people, but he is describing persistent, purposeful people.

And keep in mind they had every reason to assume that God wasn't all that aware of them. God wasn't granting to them the promises of the covenant they had worked hard to defend and serve.

You would expect Luke to follow their testimony up by telling us they had a wagon load of children.

But instead, barrenness. This was presumed to be a sign of God's withholding of His blessing. During these Old Testament days, obedience led to fruitfulness according to Deuteronomy 7:14.



Discussion Question

People automatically assumed that something must be wrong somewhere.

Zechariah and Elizabeth seem to walk with God, but God hasn't opened her womb, so there must be something behind closed doors going on, which is why Luke emphasizes their character here. They weren't being judged by God, although it might have looked like it during these Old Testament days.

In fact, at the end of this chapter, Elizabeth will rejoice that God has taken away her reproach from among the people.

Unfortunately, the rabbis had been teaching the legalistic tradition that several kinds of people weren't able to enjoy close communion with God — they included a man who was single and had no wife, and a couple who had no children.

William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 10

Of course, the Lord Jesus Himself will shatter these misconceptions; he never had a wife and never fathered any children and yet He experienced communion with God the Father that every one of us would love to experience more closely.

But this is the religious cloud they have lived under for their entire married life.

Now with that as a backdrop, we're told here in **verse 8** that Zechariah's division of several hundred priests is called up to begin a week of service.

Verse 9 tells us that lots were cast to determine which priest had the special privilege of burning incense inside the

Holy Place, just outside the Holy of Holies.

This would have been the high point of a priest's entire ministry. In fact, a priest could only do this one time during his ministry.

Garland, p. 65

And many priests among the 10,000 who were serving at this time never got the chance.

So here is Zechariah, perhaps in the last round of his priesthood, chosen to pour liquid frankincense over the hot coals of the altar inside the Holy Place.

Once inside, he would have no doubt looked in awe around him; the furniture, the candelabra, the bread, that massive curtain 30 feet high, embroidered with golden cherubim, guarding him from the Holy of Holies on the other side — to be that close would have been awe inspiring.

At this moment, Zechariah is representing Israel in the prayers of the nation ascending in that sweet smelling frankincense as it bellowed up before God.

We're told here in **verse 10** that a multitude of worshippers outside the Temple are praying as he performs this sacred task.

Look, for a country priest who had faithfully served the Lord; for a man and his wife who no doubt often wondered why the blessing of God always seemed to be on someone else, he can't wait to get home and tell Elizabeth that he had

been chosen by God for this incredible experience.

But about the time that billowing incense clears the air, he realizes he's not alone.

Verse 11 says:

*And there appeared to him
an angel of the Lord
standing on the right side of
the altar of incense. And
Zechariah was troubled
when he saw him, and fear
fell upon him.*

Luke 1:11-12

That's the biblical way of saying, he nearly passed out. Gabriel might have needed some smelling salt.

Remember, this is now the end of 400 years of silence between God and man. Between the end of Malachi in the Old Testament and here, there has not been a word from God — and there have been no angel sightings either — not in the clouds; not in somebody's enchilada; nothing, for 400 years until this moment.

Verse 13:

*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. And you will
have joy and gladness, and
many will rejoice at his
birth."*

Luke 1:13-14

Gabriel then goes on to describe the prophetic ministry of John the Baptizer — as he will become known — the forerunner of Jesus the Messiah.

But go back to that first part: ***For your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.***

But wait a second. That wouldn't have been his prayer in the Holy Place.

- He's praying for the nation;
- He's praying for the Messiah to come;
- he's probably praying for a revival among the religious leaders;
- he might even be praying for King Herod to get converted.

He's not praying for Elizabeth to have a son — at this point they are both in their late 70's, some scholars believe that this phrase "***well advanced in years***" applied to those in their 80's.

John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospel of Luke* (Kregel, 2005), p. 61

Zechariah had prayed this prayer 50 years ago, 40 years ago, he and Elizabeth had wept together, praying this prayer 30 years ago, perhaps even 20 years ago, and then time ran out.

That spare room would never be used; the sound of a child playing and running would never echo around the walls of their home.



Discussion Question

Imagine this revelation. God had seemed absent; the heavens had been unresponsive, but Gabriel says, "Oh, but God did hear your prayer 50 years ago; He heard it 40 years ago; he knew the longing and the sorrow, and the suspicion Elizabeth felt."

God knew what you prayed for 30 years ago. God knew when you gave up praying and stopped asking.

How long have you been waiting for some answer to prayer? Lord, did you hear? It's been 4 months, maybe 4 years, can you imagine 40 years?

Even when God's seems absent, He is still aware of every sorrow.

Let me give you one more unchangeable truth:

Even when things seem impossible, God is able to do the unimaginable.

I must tell you; Zechariah isn't buying it here. He asks the angel in **verse 18**:

"How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."

Luke 1:18b

By the way, husbands, there's a lesson in diplomacy to learn here. Did you notice Zechariah says, "I'm an old man, but my wife is advanced." He's a brilliant man!

How in the world can this happen?

By the way, later in chapter 1, Mary will ask Gabriel, "How can this be?" But her question is different than Zechariah's.

The original language allows us to understand that she doesn't understand how the process will work.

Adapted from Garland, p. 69

How can a virgin conceive?

But Zechariah on the other hand doesn't believe that he and his old — his advanced — wife can have a baby.



Discussion Question

For Mary it's a question of biology; for Zechariah, it's a question of belief; he wants more proof; he wants a sign from God.

Which I think is hilarious because he's standing here talking to an angel. What more do you need?

Here's the conversation; verse 18 again:

"How shall I know this? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years."

And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."

Luke 1:18b-19

Notice the word play here: **you are an old man, yes, but I am Gabriel and I stand in the presence of God.** When things seem impossible, that happens to be the perfect time. Gabriel could have spoken with eyewitness accounts since the beginning of human history, that's when our great God steps forward and does the unimaginable.

Gabriel goes on now to announce that because of unbelief, Zechariah will not be able to talk for the next 9 months.

After his service is finished, he races home, **verse 23** tells us. I can imagine he's filled with joy and awe and fear and amazement all rolled up together.

He can't wait to tell Elizabeth the news — he's probably got his mule up to 3 miles an hour!

He rushes into the house, grabs Elizabeth and tries mouthing the words. That doesn't work, so he starts playing charades — this game's been around for 2,000 years; two syllables, rhymes with maybe; he starts doing hand motions — you're — going — to — have — a — baby.

This is all spelled out in the Greek language.

She's probably thinking he's out of his mind; he should have retired earlier.

No doubt, she can see the earnestness on his face, and the tear stains on his cheeks; God had heard their prayers decades ago.

And now, at the most impossible of seasons, God the Creator will turn back the clock and perform the miraculous.

At the end of the chapter, we're told here in **verse 24** that Elizabeth conceived and then stayed hidden indoors for the next 5 months. Is this real? Who can believe our joy?

Can you see them getting a family portrait 10 months later?

"Hello, are you getting a painting with your great grandson?"

"No, this is our baby boy, we just had him a couple of months ago."

This would have really messed up somebody at Olan Mills!

Luke is the only gospel writer who gives us so many pre-natal and post-natal details — probably because he was a doctor.

And he evidently loved people, this **beloved physician**, Paul called him (**Colossians 4:14**); he loved life. You get the impression that he would have been wonderful to have around.

In fact, the verb "**rejoice**" is found more times in Luke's gospel than any other New Testament book.

Hughes, p. 17

The phrase, "**praising God**" occurs more times in Luke's gospel than all the rest of the New Testament combined.

Barclay, p. 4

And right from the outset we can understand why — our faith isn't make believe; the certainty of our faith is built on these unchangeable truths, and that leads us to the joyful certainty that:

- Even when God's authority seems unimportant and irrelevant to our world around us, He is in total control.
- Even when God seems absent and the heavens are silent, He is still aware of every sorrow and every longing and every prayer.
- Even when things seem impossible, God is ready, at His timing, and fully capable to do the unexpected, the unimaginable, the miraculous.

Just imagine that family photo!

Look at that old man — grinning from ear to ear.

- Zechariah means, "God remembered" — and He did;
- Elizabeth refers to the faithfulness of God — and He was;
- Their bouncing little baby, John, his name means, "God is gracious" — and He is.

And with that, Gabriel is commissioned by the Lord to deliver another unexpected message.

He delivered a message to Zechariah that his wife, who would never expect to have a baby, will; next, Gabriel will tell a young

woman, who shouldn't be expecting a baby that she will.

Luke is leading us into the miraculous, life-changing, Messiah-coming, silence-shattering declaration of joy. This is the good news of great joy!

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