

The Gospel of Luke

Lesson 1: The Births Foretold: Gabriel, Zechariah, and Mary -- Luke 1:1-56

An old priest is standing alone in the holy place, closer to the presence of God than he has ever been, when the air beside the altar of incense seems to fold open and an angel is standing there. Zechariah has waited his whole life for an answer to one prayer, and he has all but given up on it. He and Elizabeth are old now. The cradle in their home was never filled. And on the single most ordinary extraordinary day of his career, while the crowd outside waits for him to come out and bless them, heaven interrupts the routine. Gabriel has come to tell a childless man that God has heard, that God remembers, and that God is about to do something that will make people who never knew Zechariah's name rejoice for two thousand years.

Luke opens his Gospel like a careful historian, telling Theophilus that he has investigated everything from the beginning so that his reader may have certainty about the things he has been taught. This is not a collection of legends gathered around a campfire. It is an orderly account, drawn from eyewitnesses, written so that ordinary believers could stake their lives on it. And then, having promised us solid ground, Luke walks us straight into a story full of angels and silenced tongues and a virgin who is told she will carry the Son of God. He wants us to know, from the first page, that the most astonishing claims in this book are also the most well attested.

Two announcements stand side by side in this chapter, and they are meant to be compared. An old priest in the temple, surrounded by every advantage of religion, hears the good news and asks for proof. A young woman in an unimportant town, with no credentials but a willing heart, hears something far more staggering and answers, "Let it be to me according to your word." One walks out unable to speak. The other breaks into a song that the church has never stopped singing. Luke is showing us, before Jesus has even been born, what kind of heart God is looking for.

We tend to read these familiar verses too quickly, as a warm-up before the real story begins. But everything is here already. The faithfulness of God to the smallest forgotten people. The breaking in of a salvation that turns the world's order upside down. And at the center of it all, a child who is not merely a great prophet or a good man, but the Son of the Most High, conceived by the Holy Spirit, whose kingdom will have no end. Read these verses slowly. Let yourself stand in the temple with Zechariah, and in the doorway with Mary, and ask what it would mean to actually believe that nothing is impossible with God.

Group Discussion: Luke tells Theophilus that he wrote his Gospel so that his reader "may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (1:4). In a world that treats faith as a private feeling or a leap in the dark, what difference does it make that Christianity rests on eyewitness testimony and a carefully investigated account? Why does it matter that our faith is built on what actually happened?

Personal Reflection: Zechariah had prayed for a child for decades, and by the time the answer came he had likely stopped expecting it. Is there a prayer you have quietly given up on, or a promise of God you have a hard time believing still applies to you? What would it look like to bring that back to God this week with honest hope rather than resignation?

Read Luke 1:1-56

Study Questions

1. Luke says he wrote “an orderly account” after “having followed all things closely for some time past” so that Theophilus would have “certainty” (1:1-4). What does this opening tell us about the nature of the Gospel record and the foundation of our faith, and how is this different from a faith based merely on personal experience or sincere feeling?
2. When Gabriel announced the birth of John, Zechariah responded, “How shall I know this?” and was left unable to speak (1:18-20), while Mary asked “How will this be?” and was given a sign and a blessing (1:34-38). Looking honestly at your own heart, where are you more like Zechariah, demanding proof before you will trust God, and where might God be inviting you to simply believe?
3. Gabriel tells Mary that the child will be “great” and “will be called the Son of the Most High,” that the Lord God will give him “the throne of his father David,” and that “of his kingdom there will be no end” (1:32-33). What does this announcement teach about who Jesus is and the nature of the kingdom He came to establish?
4. Mary answered the angel, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (1:38), even though saying yes would cost her reputation and reorder her entire life. What is one area where God is asking you to surrender your own plans to His word, and what makes that surrender hard for you right now?
5. When Gabriel explains how Mary, a virgin, will conceive, he says, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God” (1:35). Why is the virgin birth essential rather than optional to the Christian faith, and what would be lost if Jesus were merely a great man specially used by God?
6. Zechariah and Elizabeth are described as “righteous before God, walking blamelessly” (1:6), and yet they carried the ache of unanswered prayer for many years. How do you tend to interpret long seasons of waiting or disappointment, and what does this couple teach you about remaining faithful when God seems silent?
7. Gabriel declares, “For nothing will be impossible with God” (1:37). Where in the Scriptures and in this passage do we see God doing what is humanly impossible, and how does anchoring our confidence in God’s power, rather than in our circumstances, change the way we pray?
8. When Mary arrived, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and cried out with joy, honoring Mary and her Lord rather than envying the younger woman who carried someone greater than her own son (1:41-45). When God blesses someone around you more visibly than He

has blessed you, how do you usually respond, and what would Elizabeth's gladness look like in your own relationships?

9. In the Magnificat, Mary calls God "my Savior" (1:47), rejoices that the Mighty One "has done great things" for her, and celebrates a God who "has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate" (1:46-55). What does this song teach about God's character, about salvation, and about Mary's own need for a Savior, and how does it guard us against either ignoring Mary or exalting her beyond what Scripture allows?
10. Look back across the whole passage, from Luke's careful prologue to Mary's song of praise. God moves through old priests and young peasant girls, through silence and song, to bring His salvation into the world. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from Luke 1:1-56 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Isaiah 7:14, the sign of a virgin who will conceive and bear Immanuel; Galatians 4:4-5, God sending His Son, born of a woman, in the fullness of time; John 1:1-14, the eternal Word who became flesh and dwelt among us; 1 Samuel 2:1-10, Hannah's song that echoes through Mary's Magnificat; Philippians 2:5-11, the mind of Christ who humbled Himself and was exalted.