

The Gospel of Luke

Lesson 2: The Birth of John and of Jesus -- Luke 1:57–2:20

The neighbors crowd into Elizabeth's house full of joy, because the old woman everyone had quietly pitied is holding a son. On the eighth day they gather for the circumcision, ready to name the boy Zechariah after his father, and they are confused when Elizabeth insists, "He shall be called John." They turn to the father, who has not spoken a word in nine months, and he asks for a writing tablet and scratches out the same name. At that instant his tongue is loosed and the first sound from his freed mouth is not complaint but praise. Fear falls on the whole hill country of Judea, and people begin to ask the question that hangs over this entire chapter: "What then will this child be?" The answer, it turns out, is bound up with a far greater child still to come.

Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, breaks into a prophecy the church has sung ever since. He does not begin with his own son but with God: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people" (1:68). The God who seemed silent for centuries has come near. He has raised up "a horn of salvation" in the house of David, kept the oath He swore to Abraham, and is fulfilling the words of His holy prophets. Only then does the new father turn to the baby in his arms and tell him what he will be: a prophet of the Most High, going before the Lord to give His people the knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of their sins. The chapter is reaching toward a sunrise.

Then Luke pulls back the camera to show us the whole Roman world. A decree goes out from Caesar Augustus, the most powerful man alive, that all the world should be registered, and a carpenter and his pregnant young wife make the long road south to Bethlehem. Caesar thinks he is counting taxpayers. God is keeping a promise, moving the Son of David to the city of David exactly as the prophets foretold. And there, with no room in the inn, in the most ordinary and humble surroundings imaginable, the Savior of the world is born and laid in a feeding trough. The God whom the heavens cannot contain is wrapped in strips of cloth.

The announcement of that birth does not go to the palace or the temple but to shepherds keeping watch in the fields at night. The glory of the Lord shines around them, and an angel tells them not to be afraid, for the news is good news of great joy for all people: "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (2:11). Suddenly the sky is full of armies of heaven praising God. The shepherds hurry to find the child, then go telling everyone, while Mary quietly treasures it all in her heart. Read these verses slowly, and ask yourself what it means that the baby in that manger is named Savior, Christ, and Lord.

Group Discussion: When the angel announces the birth, he does not say a great teacher or a powerful king has been born, but "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (2:11). Why do you think God

chose to send the good news first to ordinary shepherds working a night shift, rather than to the powerful and important people of the day? What does that tell us about who this gospel is for?

Personal Reflection: Twice in this chapter we see people respond to God with overflowing praise: Zechariah, whose first words after nine months of silence are a hymn to God, and the shepherds, who return “glorifying and praising God” (2:20). When God has worked in your life, is praise your first instinct, or do you tend to move on quickly to the next thing? What is one specific thing God has done that you have never really stopped to thank Him for?

Read Luke 1:57–2:20

Study Questions

1. When Zechariah’s tongue is finally loosed, he prophesies, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David” (1:68–69). What does Zechariah’s prophecy teach us about God’s faithfulness to His covenant promises and about the salvation that was finally arriving in Christ?
2. After nine months of silence imposed for his unbelief, the very first thing Zechariah does with his restored voice is bless God (1:64). When God restores something to you or answers a long prayer, what do you usually do first with that gift, and what would it look like to make praise your first response this week?
3. Zechariah says his son will “give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins” (1:77). According to this verse, what does the salvation God was bringing actually consist of, and why is the forgiveness of sins at the very heart of the good news rather than merely one benefit among many?
4. Mary and Joseph travel a long, hard road to Bethlehem at the worst possible time, only to find there is “no place for them in the inn” (2:7), and yet they were exactly where God intended them to be. When have you found yourself in difficult or humbling circumstances that later proved to be the very place God was working, and how does this story shape the way you read your own hard seasons?
5. Luke is careful to anchor the birth in real history: “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered” (2:1), and Joseph went up “to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David” (2:4). What does it tell us about God’s sovereignty that He used the decree of a pagan emperor to fulfill the prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem?
6. The Savior of the world entered the world with no room in the inn and was laid in a manger (2:7), and the news came first to lowly shepherds, not to kings. Where do you find yourself drawn to status, recognition, or comfort, and how does the humility of how Jesus came challenge the things you tend to chase after?
7. The angel tells the shepherds, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people” (2:10). Who is this good news for according to the angel, and how

does the universal scope of this announcement shape our understanding of the gospel and the church's mission?

8. When the shepherds had seen the child, they "made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child" and returned "glorifying and praising God" (2:17, 20), unable to keep the news to themselves. What keeps you from speaking freely to others about what God has done, and what would it look like to share the good news the way the shepherds did this week?
9. The angel declares, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (2:11), and the heavenly host cries, "Glory to God in the highest" (2:14). Who exactly is this child in the manger, and why does it matter for our salvation and our worship that He is not merely a great man or a created being, but the Christ, the Lord Himself come to save?
10. Look back across the whole passage, from the loosing of Zechariah's tongue to the shepherds returning with praise on their lips. We have watched God keep His promises, send His Son into humble circumstances, and announce salvation to the lowly. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from Luke 1:57-2:20 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Micah 5:2, the prophecy that the ruler of Israel would come from Bethlehem; 2 Samuel 7:12-16, God's covenant promise of an everlasting throne in the house of David; John 1:14, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us; Philippians 2:5-8, Christ emptying Himself and being born in the likeness of men; Titus 2:11-14, the grace of God appearing, bringing salvation for all people.