

Luke 1

Christ Announced for His Messianic Ministry

Introduction

¹Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

(Luke 1:1-4)

Who was Luke?

Luke was not one of the twelve apostles, and therefore not a witness to the events in the Lord's life as Matthew and John were. We will see later how Luke made sure that he had his facts straight.

Though himself not an apostle, Luke did travel with Paul on parts of his missionary journeys. He was an eyewitness to many events. This is described in the book of Acts which has been called "the companion volume"¹ to the Gospel of Luke. The complete account given by Luke in both books covers the Lord Jesus' life from conception to death and from resurrection to ascension.

In Colossians 4:14 the apostle Paul writes that "Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings". This passage is commonly accepted as referring to Luke who wrote the Gospel and also the book of Acts. Luke is called "the doctor" and based on this he is commonly regarded as being a physician, a man of medical science.¹ It is interesting to note how Luke describes diseases and illnesses, and how these are cured.

When Paul is imprisoned in Rome, many of his colleagues leave him. Demas has gone to Thessalonica ("because he loved this world"), Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Perhaps the last two men have gone to those areas to preach the Gospel or to visit the churches. Paul writes rather poignantly, "Only Luke is with me" (2 Timothy 4:10,11). Luke was a man of perseverance whose loyalty to Paul (and the Gospel of Jesus Christ) never wavered. Luke is also mentioned to be with Paul, along with Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, and Demas, most likely in Rome, although perhaps in Ephesus. We conclude that Luke was with Paul until the end of Paul's life.

The Christian church has never doubted the authenticity of the Gospel according to Luke. Although he has not identified himself as the author, the authorship of Luke was

¹ See for example the introduction to the Gospel of Luke provided by the NIV Study Bible.

not seriously questioned. It is also to be noted that whenever Luke accompanied Paul on his travels he often used the word “we”. Luke was not merely a spectator to the events, but he was a participating member of the mission team, an ardent believer and faithful companion.

It is generally assumed that Luke was born in Antioch, from where the missionaries went into the Roman Empire. As an educated man Luke was fluent in the Greek language. This was an immense advantage. It is also assumed that Luke was well-known and much-loved in the Christian churches of the apostolic time.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8 about the collection for the needy in Jerusalem which would be conducted by Titus, and he adds “And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the Gospel” (verse 18). It is possible that Luke is meant, but others suggest that it was probably Barnabas. Luke certainly has a good place and a solid reputation within the early Christian churches.

It is also generally assumed that Luke stayed with Paul until he died. What happened to Luke after Paul’s death? We do not know for sure. But there is a later prologue (introduction) from the second century A.D. which states that “[Luke] served the Lord without distraction, having neither wife nor children, and at the age of eighty-four he fell asleep in Boeotia, full of the Holy Spirit.² His entire adult life was fruitfully devoted to the service of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Who was Theophilus?

Both the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, each written by Luke, are directed especially to a man called Theophilus. Perhaps it is good to inquire who Theophilus is and why Luke wrote to him.

Theophilus is addressed as “most excellent” and this indicates that Theophilus was a real person (and not a “nom de plume”) and perhaps one who had a higher ranking in the Roman scheme of things. Note that in Acts 1 this title is missing and only the name Theophilus is used. Some see this as evidence of the fact that Theophilus became a Christian after receiving the Gospel of Luke, but this is only conjecture.

We simply do not know who Theophilus was. He is generally thought to have been a man of influence and wealth. When Luke wrote the Gospel, Theophilus had already received some instruction and teaching (verse 4) but Luke considered a more complete and orderly version of the Gospel as being necessary. It is not easy to be a Christian, and especially not if you don’t have your facts straight.

In this prologue, Luke admits that he, unlike the apostles, was not an eyewitness to the things that had happened to our Lord Jesus Christ. He also mentions that many have undertaken to draw up an account of the events of the Lord’s life and death. There may

² See, Norval Geldhuis, Commentary of the Gospel of Luke (NIC), Eerdmans 1972 edition, p 17)

have been various other written versions available, the main of which was probably the Gospel according to Mark, but Luke considered an orderly and elaborate account necessary so that Theophilus can be absolutely certain about what really happened.

There is another element that we should note. Luke assures Theophilus that he has “carefully investigated everything from the beginning” (1:3). I mentioned that Luke was a doctor, a man trained to approach matters in a careful, methodical and scientific manner. Everything he was told had to be verified, so that there would be no doubt concerning the true course of events.

Please note also the word “fulfilled” in 1:1b: “an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us.” This indicates, in the least, that things did not just “happen” but that there is in Christ’s life and work a fulfillment of things that had been promised of old. This is important because the Gospel always draws lines to the Old Testament and sees the events of Christ’s life as the fulfillment of God’s promises proclaimed in the prophecies of old.

Luke does not stand alone, but sees the Gospel as a completion of God’s great promises. He also admits that he is not an eyewitness of these events. He is not an apostle. He is not writing from first-hand experience, and he was not “a servant of the word”, an ordained preacher although he was often a companion of such persons.

What Luke has done is carefully investigate everything from the beginning. He had unlimited access to those who were eyewitnesses in the fullest sense of the word. Being a physician, a man of science and logic, he was able to write an “orderly” and trustworthy account. Luke checked and re-checked everything to make sure his writing was accurate and factual. I stress this from out of Luke’s own prologue because it is of decisive importance.

What is the Purpose of Luke’s Gospel?

The question arises: what was Luke’s purpose in writing this Gospel, other than providing an accurate account for Theophilus? We know that Matthew wrote his gospel especially with a view to the Jews to show how Christ fulfilled the Scriptures of old. Apparently Matthew has many additional proof-texts from the Old Testament to show that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Matthew also takes care to emphasize that Jesus Christ is the rightful heir to the throne of David.

Mark’s (John Mark) version of the Gospel is very simple and compact with much emphasis on Jesus works rather than on his words. Mark may have been the young man who fled away naked when Christ was arrested (see Mark 14:41). The writer Mark moves on briskly in presenting the key facts and events of Jesus’ life death and resurrection. Mark’s Gospel appears to give a prominent place to the suffering involved in discipleship. It was probably written in Rome when persecutions began against Christians.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are together often called “the synoptic Gospels”. The word “synoptic” means to look at something from the same angle. The three evangelists

describe the events in practically the same order and content. There are some differences, to be sure, but these are minor and all can be adequately explained. In the course of looking at Luke we may note some differences with the other synoptic Gospels, but our purpose is not to dwell on this aspect.

The Gospel according to John is quite different from the others. John is much more focused on broader concepts. John's emphasis is that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world. John gives us also some of the grand discourses of Christ. The theme of John's Gospel is found in John 20:30 and 31, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Luke wrote his Gospel, as I indicated, to give accurate information to a Roman aristocrat. Luke explains many matters for the Roman way of thinking. But there is in the Gospel according to Luke also the unmistakable claim that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, and the King of all creation.

I touched on the title "Messiah" earlier. The word "Messiah" comes from the Hebrew and means the one who is called and enabled to deliver his people. Messiah means "the Anointed One." The same word is rendered in Greek as "the Christ". It also means "the Anointed One". The point here is that Jesus comes from God, is himself God, officially called and lawfully appointed to be the Saviour of the world. He has the gifts to realize his goal. He is the true and only Saviour of all mankind. That is the claim in the name "Messiah". The Jewish leaders did not accept this designation and the crowds did not understand it.

The underlying theme in all these chapters is the coming of the Messianic Kingdom, the new realm that God will realize in his own Son. The theme of the Messianic Kingdom runs through this entire book, sometimes clearly apparent, sometimes less visible. But the main theme is that God in his Son Jesus Christ is bringing about a new world in which all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ may share.

The word "Gospel" (coming from the Greek Language) means a message of glad tidings. The original word is "evangel" (*to euangelion*). There are many sad elements in the Gospel—as there are also in everyday human life—but the overall tone of the Gospel is joy. God makes us happy through this Gospel. When studying the first book of Luke, it is important to remember that its character is one of joyous proclamation.

With these four versions of the Gospel it becomes quite clear to all who Jesus Christ is and what he has done, and even more what he is still doing today. Of Christ it is preached that "Salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). This is the central message of the Bible that is clearly contained in each Gospel as the heart of God's glorious revelation.

Doctrinal Certainties

What doctrine of Scripture becomes evident here? This introductory passage is one of the many places in Scripture where we are led to speak of “inspiration”. It is the Holy Spirit, the Primary Author, who chose and enabled Luke to perform this work of service. We are assured that God’s Word is true, also in the Gospels. At the same time we are reminded that inspiration is not mechanical but organic. This Gospel, as do the others, has the clear imprint of the secondary writer (cf. Art. 3 & 5, Belgic Confession). It is an exciting prospect to study a book with such unique credentials.

Homiletical Horizons

It pleased God to give us four very accurate versions of the Gospel. All have the same message. One message is handed down to us as the unmistakable truth about God’s work of salvation. We may not doubt, not even one word. Because Luke’s Gospel was written with utmost care and as an orderly account, we can derive from it not only needed information but also immense comfort. Jesus is the Messiah of God. In him a new world becomes evident and is realized. He is God’s gift to us that we might offer ourselves to him as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1, 2). The Gospel comes to us as we are and where we are, wealthy or poor, aristocrat or citizen, so that we all each in our own place may serve God and promote his Kingdom.

The Coming of John the Baptizer (Luke 1:5-25)

Every history has a beginning somewhere. The history of Jesus Christ in fact goes back to Genesis 3, where God promises to fallen mankind a Son who will crush the head of the serpent, the Devil. This son would be born in time in the line of David and through him the kingdom of God would be established over all the earth.

Please note that I use the word history. A “history” is an accurate record of events. It tells us what actually and really happened. This word reminds us that we are dealing with divine revelation. Therefore I prefer not to use the word “story” which can easily refer to fictional events. For the same reason I choose not to use the word “narrative” which has come to mean in some cases an account of events as told by one person to another without divine guidance. The words “story” and “narrative” can be used as long as it is understood that we are dealing with things that happened in reality.

The Lord Jesus Christ, then, is proclaimed immediately after the fall into sin. Throughout the history of Israel the promise about this Son is repeated and confirmed. He is the King who will come into his glory. Towards the end of the Old Testament it is revealed that the coming of this Saviour would be announced and heralded by someone who reminds strongly of Elijah, the prophet. This man in the tradition of Elijah is John the Baptizer.

The prophet Malachi is the last Old Testament prophet. Through Malachi God makes known the coming of the day of the LORD when God will finally realize judgment over all the earth. That day is surely coming. Before that day comes, however, God will once more call his people to repentance and faith. In Malachi 4:5 and 6 we read, “See I will

send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

In the book of Malachi it seems as if Elijah is literally and personally meant. But this is not the case, as the New Testament shows. The turning of the hearts (fathers to children, children to fathers) means that the generations will be united once more in faith and obedience. The purpose of the Elijah-figure will be to unite all Israel in the expectation of the coming of the Saviour.³

The Jews therefore believed that before the promised Messiah came, the great prophet Elijah would come. Some expected literally that Elijah would come in person. Others saw it differently: there would be a person with a ministry like that of Elijah. Awaiting the appearance of the great Elijah, many Jews would have an open chair at the Passover meal, for Elijah (*Eliyahu Hanavi*) should he appear. There was on the table during the Seder (a meal during the Passover night, when the history of the Exodus is retold) a cup filled with wine, meant for Elijah. This custom has undergone some changes with regard to the expectation of Elijah’s appearing, but it still a point worth noting.

When Luke begins his version of the Gospel, he is led to start with the birth and ministry of John the Baptizer who will announce the coming of the Lord and even personally identify him. The name John the Baptist has made way for a more accurate name: John the Baptizer. The word “Baptist” suggests a church denomination with very specific doctrines while the name “the Baptizer” denotes John’s own, ongoing work.

This means that John the Baptizer is a special person with a unique, one-time task. Therefore John comes into this world in a very special way. This special way is described in Luke 1:5-25. While all evangelists write about the ministry of John to prepare the way for the Christ, only Luke delves into the facts of John’s own special beginning. We find this history in Luke 1:5-25, which we follow from the NIV Bible.

The Birth of John the Baptizer Foretold

The birth of our Lord Jesus Christ is preceded by the history of the birth of John the Baptizer. In recounting this history, Luke digs deeper than any of the other evangelists. All Gospels begin with John’s ministry; only Luke dwells on the wondrous manner in which John was born.

*⁵In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.
⁶Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments*

³ It is important to note that Malachi speaks of the uniting of *fathers and children*. Often we hear about a generation gap. Every generation has its own insights and needs. But there should be no gap. Every generation anew must learn to build on the same Gospel.

and regulations blamelessly. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

⁸Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

¹¹Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. ¹⁶Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

¹⁸Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

¹⁹The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

²¹Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²²When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

²³When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵"The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

(Luke 1:5-25)

The time in which this takes place is during the reign of "Herod, king of Judea" (1:5). This king was called "Herod the Great". Herod was a wicked king of Edomite descent. He constantly oppressed his people. His suspicious nature even led him to kill his own family members out of fear that they would take his throne. It was not beyond him to have scores of children massacred in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16-18).

The circumstances of John's birth are unique and special. This means that John would have a very special ministry: to proclaim and identify the Lord Jesus Christ. Whenever a birth has direct divine involvement and sanction, we know that a person is born with a

very particular task. John's birth and ministry should therefore never be seen as one that stands alone by itself. John is the immediate precursor to Jesus.

We read about two people, a married couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were both "descendants" of Aaron. Together with Moses, Aaron functioned as Israel's leaders during the great Exodus from Egypt. Thus another act of deliverance, a new Exodus, greater than all the preceding, was about to begin. This great event, however, has its roots in Israel's ancient history.

Zechariah's division of priests was chosen to minister in and around the temple. Because at this time there was a large number of Levites, the service in the temple was by rotation, determined by casting the lot. Zechariah was also chosen to take responsibility for the special task of burning incense during the time that the morning and evening sacrifices were brought (Exodus 30:7-10). In all this we see God's providential care and power.

There is an important line which we notice already in Luke 1. Of both Elizabeth and Zechariah it is said that they were upright before God and kept his commandments blamelessly. Something similar is said later about Mary (1:28) "...you who are highly favoured..." about Joseph (Matthew 1:19, "...a righteous man..."), and Simeon and Anna. All these people who were providentially involved in Jesus' birth were well-recommended by the Holy Spirit.

Being upright, blameless, righteous, and humble does not mean being without sin (for no human being except Christ is without sin) but it does indicate that these people were all heartily believing and faithful. They walked in the way of faith, and therefore when their time came they were able to serve God in the way which he had decided. There is a Scriptural line here: if we want to be called into God's special service, we must love and serve him every day of our lives.

At this point it is good to note what is said later of Simeon (2:25-32). It is written about Simeon that he was righteous and devout. This is similar to what is said about the others. But here Luke adds something important. Simeon was "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (2:25). The word "consolation" reminds us of what the prophet Isaiah wrote about the coming of the Messiah, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed..." (Isaiah 40:1,2) The repetition of the word "comfort" means that this is a very express command. The Messiah is coming; therefore it is a time of joyous advent and of great expectation.

Apparently there was at this time much anticipation that the Messiah would soon come. Many religious Jews in John the Baptizer's days expected the coming of the Messiah in a short period of time. Even the Samaritans had some understanding of the coming of the Messiah (John 4:25) for the woman at the well says, "I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming..." The Samaritans, however, saw the Messiah only as a great prophet, but not as a Saviour.

There is another historical line in this section of Scripture which we should not overlook. Luke writes in 1:7 that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth had no children. The reason given is that Elizabeth was barren. Added to this is that they both were advanced in years. The time of fertility was long gone and this couple no longer expected a child. Should Elizabeth become pregnant and bear a child, it will certainly be a great miracle and mystery for her and her husband. The word “mystery” in a biblical sense indicates something that you know but cannot fully comprehend or explain.

It should be noted at this point that God’s Word more often makes clear that his work continues especially through people who are seemingly the least equipped for the task placed in their life and on their shoulders. Think of Hannah or of Sara. In this way it becomes clear that God is powerfully at work. Salvation is never the work of mankind, although people providentially are taken up in it.

The Angel’s Appearing Before Prayer

Zechariah had received the calling to serve at the incense altar in the temple. This incense offering followed the great sin-offering and took place when the sun rose or before the darkness set in. The incense altar and its use are described in Exodus 30:1-10.

The offering of incense accompanied the morning and evening prayers. After the sin offering was brought, the priest would burn incense on a special altar. This incense sweetened the prayers that were directed to God in heaven. Those waiting outside the holy area would know that the time for prayer had come. The people who had gathered in the temple courts would pray together with the priest, and afterwards receive the priestly blessing (Numbers 6:22-27).

We should note at this point that there is only one altar in heaven, the golden altar for the incense offering (Revelation 6:9). Under this altar are “the souls of those have been slain because of the word of God...” The prayers of the believers on earth are combined with the prayers of those in heaven, and an angel then places much incense on the incense altar. “The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of all the saints, went up before God from the angel’s hand” (Revelation 8:4).

This reminds us of what is written in Psalm 141:2. “May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.” Note that prayer follows the sacrifice where atonement has been made for sin and is offered with incense. Because our Lord Jesus Christ atoned for our sins by his sacrifice on the cross, the only altar left is the altar of prayer. We today do not make sacrifices of atonement anymore. The sacrifice that we must bring is the living sacrifice of praise and prayer.

It is therefore no surprise that an angel appears to Zechariah in the temple at the place and time of the incense offering. This is the work that angels are also concerned with in heaven. Note that in Luke 1:11 the angel who appears to Zechariah is standing at the

right side of the altar of incense. This would be his position facing the LORD also if he served in heaven.

Of course, the appearing of an angel at this point in Zechariah's life is quite a surprise. As a matter of fact, this sudden appearing was so unexpected that it deeply startled Zechariah and he "was gripped with fear" (1:12); we read more often that when people find themselves faced with heavenly beings, they are truly afraid. See the examples of Gideon (Judges 6:22-23) and Manoah (Judges 13:20-22). In heavenly creatures they would perhaps see God himself. In both cases, the one who appears is called "the angel of the LORD", a designation that is most often used to indicate Christ before his incarnation. Manoah realizes what this means and exclaims "We are doomed to die! We have seen God!"

In the case of Zechariah it does not say that the angel of the LORD appeared, only "*an* angel of the LORD", but this is enough to cause great fear and concern in Zechariah. The fear is so real that the angel has to calm the priest, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard."

We later discover exactly who this angel is. He says, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news" (1:19). The name Gabriel means "God is strong", or "God is my strength". This implies that whatever is said to happen will indeed happen, even though it is humanly speaking impossible.

There are in Scripture only two angels who are recognized by name: Gabriel here and Michael elsewhere. In both cases the revealing of the name of the angel means that God has himself come with mighty power to fulfill his promises. Whenever these angels appear, we can be sure that great and decisive events are about to happen.

Your Prayer has been Heard

When the angel speaks to Zechariah, he first puts him at ease: "do not be afraid, Zechariah." Then he adds, "Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you are to give him the name John."

The question is which prayer the angel means. Some explainers say that Zechariah and Elizabeth perhaps for many years had prayed to have a child, preferably a son who would continue the line of Zechariah's generation. Others suggest that already for many years now Zechariah and Elizabeth will no longer have prayed this particular prayer. It is clear that a child is not forthcoming. God has not answered this prayer, and in that case it is better not to ask anymore. This elderly couple will have resigned themselves to God's decision. I read somewhere that Zechariah did not believe the angel because he no longer believed there would be a positive answer.⁴

⁴ See The Communicator's Library, LUKE, by Bruce Larson, page 29 (ed. Lloyd J. Ogilvie), Waco, Texas, 1983.

It is not clear what prayer is meant.⁵ We should note that at every service in the temple after the great sin offering was made, there was a prayer dedicated to the coming of the Messiah. As officiating priest, Zechariah will most certainly have prayed this messianic prayer. Perhaps we can see the angel's words as an answer to both prayers. We learn that when God does answer prayer it has greater consequence and wider blessing than first anticipated.

It is clear from verse 13 that there is a direct line to the prayer for a son. Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.⁶ We will later see why this name is unexpected and very important.

The Prophecy of the Angel

The angel Gabriel first assures Zechariah personally that the birth of John will be a cause for great happiness. "He will be a joy and a delight to you." Children are to be received in the joy that through their life God will further the coming of his kingdom. In this hope we receive and nurture our children.

But John's birth will have further significance and wider meaning. "And many will rejoice because of his birth". John's unique ministry to prepare the coming of the Messiah will give joy to many. John's ministry will lead also to frustration and anger with some. He will finally be imprisoned and executed. But that is of later concern. His birth itself will cause many to rejoice. At last God's promise about the Messiah will be fulfilled!

The angel also indicates that John "will be great in the sight of the LORD". This does not refer to John's physical prowess. It means rather that John's ministry will be powerful and blessed. God will greatly esteem and bless his servant John. His word will have tremendous consequences. John will call God's estranged children back to righteousness and obedience. His baptism will be one of preparation, calling the people to repent and to receive the Messiah in holiness

There will be much that reminds of the great Elijah of old. John will appear quite suddenly on the scene, as did Elijah (1 Kings 17:1). His prophecy will be one that stresses the impending judgment of God. Also in an outward sense, Elijah and John will be similar. Elijah is described as a man "with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist" (2 Kings 1:8). Matthew writes, "John's clothes were made of camel's hair and he had a leather belt around His waist." (Matthew 3:4) Seeing John, it was not a stretch to think of Elijah. Just as Elijah did, John had to speak about the impending judgment of God. When John saw that many of the Sadducees and Pharisees⁷ came to be baptized by him, he said, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" (Matthew 3:7) Those who do not truly repent will not escape God's

⁵ See Geldenhuys, o.c. page 64.

⁶ The name John from the Hebrew root means "The Lord is gracious", see NIV text note.

⁷ The Sadducees and Pharisees were Israel's (spiritual) leaders at this time and John rebukes them for trying to flee from the coming wrath without repentance.

righteous wrath. John is to take away any false illusions. He has “to make ready a people prepared for the LORD” (1:17).

The Function of a Nazirite

All this will also have personal consequences for John himself. The angel Gabriel says about John “He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from birth” (1:15b).

Some explainers take these words to mean that John was a Nazirite. The Nazirites were people who were exceptionally bound to the service of God. We find the instruction concerning a Nazirite in Numbers 6:1-4.

The Nazirites were persons who had in a special way for a certain time (sometimes for a lifetime) devoted themselves to the LORD. The rules for Nazirites are clear but not simple. First, they must be filled with the Holy Spirit. Second they may not shave, but must let their hair grow. Third, Nazirites were not allowed to drink any alcoholic beverages, not even to eat grapes. Drunkenness, not uncommon in pagan rituals, was incompatible with serving the Lord God especially among office bearers.

Why did the Lord institute the office of a Nazirite, when there were ample Levites? At bottom, all Israelites should be Nazirites. Those who dedicated themselves to the LORD in a special way, made it clear that every Israelite belongs to God and was obligated to serve him. Besides John the Baptist we find in Scripture that Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11) and Samson (Judges 13) were also Nazirites. Called to a special work, these men were given special gifts. This was, then, also important for John the Baptizer for he had one task: to prepare people through powerful preaching for the coming of the Messiah and personally to identify him.

The Nazirite stipulations applied to John meant that he truly received from God a very special task that would dominate his life, even in a deeply personal manner.

The Priest Who Could Not Speak

Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this?” (1:18) He indicates also why he needs some assurance: “I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.” The angel Gabriel does not appreciate Zechariah’s response. He says: “You did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.”

Is Gabriel’s reaction not too harsh? It is true that humanly speaking Elizabeth and Zechariah both are far beyond their childbearing days. Zechariah’s concern appears to be well-founded. In the Old Testament we also read about saints asking for some assurance, even a specific sign. Abraham was told to look up to the stars (Genesis 15:4,5). The promise of a son would be fulfilled not in Ishmael but in Isaac. Gideon outrightly said: give me a sign! (Judges 6:17,18) Also King Hezekiah who was to be healed from a terminal illness asked, “What will be the sign that the LORD will heal me and that I will go to the temple of the LORD on the third day from now?” (2 Kings 20:8). These men were not reprimanded as was Zechariah.

We can understand it when people in difficult circumstances ask for a special sign. Sometimes in his grace, the LORD grants a sign. But God is not obligated. His people are to take him at his word! In Zechariah's case the matter prophesied is so sure that he should not have doubted God's word. Therefore a rebuke follows. But the punishment is not severe or life-threatening. Actually the sign that is given will serve to underscore the certainty of God's Word. Zechariah will not be able to speak until the child is born. Everyone around him will see that something important has happened! The "sign" is meant as much for the Israelites as it is for Zechariah himself.

Doctrinal Certainties

We ought to take God at his Word. When he promises something, he will also give it, in his time and manner. This is important also with respect to signs given to us. I think now especially of Holy Baptism. Baptism is typical advent activity: people are being called and prepared to live with the Lord.

God does not call people in his service who are strong of themselves. The Bible does not allow for "hero worship". Unfortunately the NIV commentators use the expression "heroes of the faith in the pre-Christian era".⁸ In human terms there are no heroes, so nobody should think that he is not "good enough". There is also the danger that we might pride ourselves on something that is not our own but God's grace working in us. "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." (Romans 12:3) God calls us and also assures us that we will be able to meet the challenges of that calling. Actually, we receive strength beyond understanding.

Homiletical Horizons

Sometimes ardent believers and committed Christians need to be reprimanded and encouraged to expect more from the Lord in his service. If we may not think highly of ourselves, we should think highly of God. We should believe that when the Lord lays upon us a certain burden or gives us a heavy responsibility that he also gives us the strength as the ability to do what he asks. Human responsibility is always based on divine ability. God enables whom he calls.

Especially when preaching in the time of Advent, the emphasis must be on the way that God equips people to accept his ways and go in his strength, as the angel says to Mary, "For nothing is impossible with God." (1:37) Perhaps this is the best advent text of all.

Confusion and Seclusion

The angel says to Zechariah that "you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at the proper time." (1:20)

⁸ See the NIV comment on Hebrews 11:2 when it explains "the ancients".

I mentioned that this rebuke is not life-threatening. Zechariah will survive. But at the same time, the rebuke is embarrassing. For a priest to be unbelieving or skeptical is not acceptable. The punishment fits the crime, so to speak: if you will not listen, you cannot speak. The two –listening and speaking– are very closely connected. This is a reminder to all that you can only speak with conviction and effect, if you have believed the Word of God.

The people waiting outside the temple are becoming a little concerned that the priest does not appear to them. After the prayer and incense offering the priest normally comes right out to the people and blesses them. This blessing is the culmination of the temple service: the people may go in peace, assured of God's grace. The blessing is a very important element in the temple worship. One of the Psalms, the concluding song of ascents, given in Psalm 134, tells us about this blessing, "May the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion."

It is for this blessing that the people have come, sacrificed and prayed. Imagine their amazement when the priest does come out but is unable to speak. They conclude that he must have seen a "vision" in the temple. He kept making signs to them and may have even raised his hands in a silent benediction. One might say that a grand opportunity to preach the Gospel has been lost. But Zechariah's inability to speak now will ultimately underscore his message when he does speak later.

So there is confusion in Jerusalem. Soon the scene shifts, for God is rapidly progressing. We read that Zechariah goes home, when his term in Jerusalem is over, and resumes his work at home. Still unable to speak, Zechariah's malady will have been something strange and unusual to all who witnessed it. The communicator cannot communicate.

Zechariah returned home and his wife became pregnant. There is no sensationalism in Luke's account. Please note that Luke does not give any elaborate description of this conception. He writes simply that she became pregnant. The same sobriety will be used when he writes in the next chapter about the pregnancy of Mary, the mother of Jesus, our Lord. The Bible is always honestly to the point, but is devoid of sensationalism. The people whom the Lord calls in special service experience his protection and care. This is also how the Holy Spirit guided Luke in his account of these amazing things.

Before we go the next segment of Luke 1, we note that Elizabeth goes into seclusion for five months. She motivates this as follows, "The LORD has done this for me...in these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."(1:25)

The question is: why did she go into seclusion? Would it not have been more positive to come out with the matter from the start? It's impossible to put ourselves in Elizabeth's sandals. There are two lines of thought on this point and each may be helpful in trying to understand. Elizabeth would by seclusion avoid all the chatter and gossip that goes around in small towns. She could use the time for meditation, prayer, and thanksgiving.

Also, when the five months are over, she is definitely “showing”, and no one can deny that she really is pregnant.

Elizabeth felt restored as a woman in Israel. Childlessness was seen in her time and place as a lack of divine favor. Perhaps she had done something sinful to be bypassed in childbirth. There is always some stigma with being barren. But now she feels restored as a woman and mother. To have a child, and even one who will be the herald of the Christ, was more than anyone at her age and in her condition could ever have dreamed.

Doctrinal Certainties

Despite our little faith and sometimes unbelief, the LORD still continues to regard us as his children and keeps calling us to his service. This calling is different for everyone, but we are to examine our lives and walk closely with the LORD. Sometimes we may be called to tasks that we never imagined. There are hopes which we have discarded, because we think that God doesn't “hear” anyway.

A mentally and physically strong man who had served God with dedication all his life was beaten down by successive and debilitating strokes once said to me, “Heaven is made of copper”. His prayers for healing went unanswered. He was deeply disappointed. Satan tries to cash in on such lapses in faith.

I responded as follows, “Well, you're right in thinking about metals”. Copper was a precious commodity also in those days. But I added, “You've got the wrong metal. Heaven is made of gold.” Sometimes we have to set a higher standard in applying Scripture.

God restores the favor of all who await him. That is certain. But we are not people who like to wait, endure, and persevere. It is something that we must learn in this life. And even when this remains problematic for us in this life, one day we will walk on streets of gold (Revelation 21:15-21).

Homiletical Horizons

It is important to note that God has very few “heroes” in his service. Encourage people to use the gifts they have and not to pine for what they do not have. Avoid all self-pity. When things happen that we did not expect or understand, take time to commune with the Lord. We truly need piety and spirituality, and must learn to see events on earth in terms of God's Kingdom. This is something which is easily lacking among Christians who are otherwise sincere.

Communities today are often not as close as they were in Zechariah's days. The times are different: everyone wants to be left alone and not bothered by others. This is the plague of modern suburbia. I have been afflicted with this plague also. But we may speak of the blessings of God and praise him with neighbours present. It is especially important to speak of what we have in Christ: the complete forgiveness of all our sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Don't preach; simply express your faith. Doctrinal discourses turn others off; joyous testimonies are more readily absorbed. Take your time; don't unpack all your goodies right away. Let people be drawn to the miracle of salvation and renewal.

Questions

At the end of each Bible chapter I have included a section with various questions on the material covered. This is meant only to expedite conversation and discussion. Since Luke 1 is a lengthy chapter I have placed questions in the middle and at the end of this chapter. On this chapter the following general questions may be of help:

- 1) Why did Luke consider another version of the Gospel necessary? What rule did he follow when writing his account?
- 2) What is the "synoptic problem"? Explain why this is not really a problem. What is in fact the benefit of a "synopsis"?
- 3) Why does Luke delve into the histories of Zechariah and Elizabeth? Explain what the meaning of advent is, what it meant for Zechariah and what it means for us today.
- 4) Is the reprimand of the angel Gabriel over Zechariah not too harsh? What can we learn from this reprimand?
- 5) Why did Elizabeth go into hiding or seclusion when she learned she was pregnant?
- 6) Why was John the Baptizer also a "Nazirite"? Determine what the purpose is of being a "Nazirite".
- 7) What was the sole purpose of John the Baptizer's life?
- 8) What is the significance of the fact that Luke was a medical doctor?
- 9) What must we do to become righteous and devout?

The Birth of Jesus Foretold (Luke 1:26-38)

²⁶In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵"The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

³⁶Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. ³⁷For nothing is impossible with God."

³⁸"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

(Luke 1:26-38)

After considering the history leading up to John the Baptizer's birth, we read how the angel Gabriel moves on to fulfill his heavenly mandate and comes to visit Mary who lives in the town of Nazareth in the region of Galilee.

Before we move on to the announcement of Gabriel to Mary, we first make some observations about the context in which she lives. Nazareth was a small town in the northern region of Galilee, where a mixed population of Jews and Canaanites (or Samaritans, named after Samaria, the capital of northern Israel) lived. Aside from the fact that the Jews rightly expected the Messiah to be born in Judea, in a city of David, Nazareth was not a likely choice for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah of Israel. Off the beaten path, it was a town without much employment or industry and hence it was a place where poverty was clearly evident. We also know that it was a town without pity or patience, for the Lord Jesus was almost killed in his hometown.

About Nazareth we note that it did not have a very good name, not even in the villages around it. Often small villages in the same proximity have a good sense of semi-friendly rivalry, but this was not the case with Nazareth. When later Philip tells a man named Nathaniel that he has found the Messiah in Nazareth, the response is, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (John 1:46) It seems that Galilee in general was not esteemed, and even among Galileans Nazareth had a very bad reputation.

Later Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish council and a follower of Jesus, is severely reprimanded by his peers when he comes to the defense of the Lord. They say to him, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee." (John 7:52) Galilee was the northern part of Israel, kind of a border area, where people had no credentials or education. Meanwhile, the Jewish leaders conveniently forgot that prophets had indeed come from the North Country. I think of Jonah who came from Gath Hopher (2 Kings 14:25), the area of Zebulun. We might think of Micah and Hosea, also prophets from northern Israel. But it is true that Galileans were not commonly esteemed in Israel.

After the Lord Jesus was presented to God in Jerusalem, his family returns to "their own town of Nazareth" (Luke 2:39). Matthew adds the account of Joseph and Mary's flight to Egypt. When the wicked Herod who tried to kill the infant Jesus died, Joseph did not want to go back to Bethlehem (out of fear for Archelaus, Herod's son). Instead he and

his family went back to Nazareth where Jesus grew into manhood. In Matthew 2:23 we read, “And [Joseph] went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said to the prophets: [Jesus] will be called a Nazarene”.

Did the name “Nazarene” have any special meaning? Notice that it says that this name was foretold “in the prophets”, but we cannot find any quote in the Old Testament that specifically contains this “prophecy”. Some explainers think that the name Nazarene is linked to the Hebrew word for “branch”, but that is speculation. The prophets spoke of Jesus’ humble and obscure origin. The reference is not meant to be an exact quote.

There is a large church federation that calls itself “The Church of the Nazarene”. This federation comes up out of the holiness movement started by the preaching of John Wesley. Following Wesley, this church federation teaches that believers can lead lives of perfect holiness in this life already. We do not follow this thinking. Since the name Jesus was not uncommon in Israel, his hometown needed to be added. “Jesus of Nazareth” for proper identification. Hence the name Nazarene was sometimes applied. Perhaps within Israel, believers were called Nazarenes, although we do not read of this specifically. It was in the Greek world that followers of Jesus became known as “Christians” (Acts 11:26).

“The Power of the Most High will Overshadow You” (1:35)

The angel Gabriel then proceeds to Nazareth, where Mary is living. We read that Mary is “a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendent of David”. It is important to note that in this section of Scripture it is stated three times that Mary is a virgin.

There is good reason for this. We find this reason in verse 35, “...The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called: the Son of God.” The conception takes place through divine overshadowing. It is not a matter of physical contact but of spiritual power.

Matthew also writes about this in his account of the concerns of Joseph, Mary’s betrothed. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream and says to him, “...what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:20). Matthew also indicates that all this is a fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah that a “‘virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him IMMANUEL’ – which means, ‘God with us.’” (see Matthew 1:23, Isaiah 7:14) In this way Christ accepts humanity without relinquishing his divinity.

The Son is conceived without the participation of a man. Note that Matthew adds about Joseph that “he had no union with [Mary] until she gave birth to a son” (Matthew 1:25). This assures us that though he is born of a woman, Jesus Christ is nevertheless the Son of God. No human involvement occurred, except that Mary was the mother. This happened so that we might become children of God (Galatians 4:4, 5).

This brings us to some reflections about the person of Mary. Undoubtedly Mary received a recognized place in the line of saints. She is greeted by Gabriel as follows, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you” (1:28). A little later the angel says, “you have found favor with God” (1:30). Mary herself receives this position and calling as a true grace from God. To a degree she understands some of the consequences, “From now on all generations will call me blessed” (1:48).

Mary, the mother of our Lord, does receive a special place in the history of redemption. She will be known through the ages as the blessed one of God. Many will come to say in some way “Ave Maria”, a song very much loved by Roman Catholic believers. Ave is a Latin word used by Romans as a greeting to a friend. In contemporary terms the word means “Hail Mary”.

Roman Catholic theology, however, ascribed to Mary sinlessness and instant perfection. For how could a sinful woman bring forth a holy child? Hence Mary was declared to be without sin. Being sinless she did not have to die and therefore Romanist tradition has decreed that Mary ascended into heaven as “Regina Mundi”, the Queen of the World. It is clear that the Bible does not at all speak in this way. Mary was sanctified by the Holy Spirit, but this did not render her sinless. Only our Lord Jesus Christ was sinless in his human nature by the power of the Holy Spirit. The overshadowing by the Spirit is sufficient to preserve the holiness of the Christ.

Because of the above, it is also unscriptural to state that Mary can intercede for the church on earth. Roman Catholics are encouraged to say many “hail Mary” prayers every day. In football a “hail Mary pass” is a last ditch attempt to score points in a game that would otherwise be lost. Again, Mary is blessed by God, and she does take in a prominent place in the line of the believers, but she is not the Queen of the World who can be approached as intercessor for believers on earth. Christ alone is King and he provides for his people. Adoration of saints takes away from the glory of the Son of God.

Doctrinal Certainties

This part of Scripture shows us that Christ came into this world and assumed our flesh and blood. He is truly man, born of the Virgin Mary. At the same time he is true and eternal God. We find here one of the foundational Biblical references concerning the two natures of Christ.

This is an important doctrine because if Christ did not have these two natures, he could not be our Saviour and we are still in our sins. Being true God, he can always help us. Being true man, he fully understands our predicament in this sinful world. We now have a heavenly mediator in human flesh. He is the perfect Saviour who is the only Mediator. These truths are confessed in the Reformed and Ecumenical creeds.

Doctrinal Certainties

The doctrine of the two natures of Christ was under attack in early Christendom. There is an ecumenical creed that was named after *Athanasius* who opposed the teaching of Arius which postulated that Jesus was not divine and did not have two natures. The

creed ends as follows, “This is the catholic faith. Unless a man believes it faithfully he cannot be saved” (Article 42). The denial of Christ’s divinity means that he cannot be our Saviour. This is strong language, unacceptable to many people today among whom there are those who call themselves “Christians”.

The Heidelberg Catechism asks why Jesus had to be true man and true God. In Lord’s Day 6 the question “Why must he be a true and righteous man?” is answered with, “He must be a true man because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin. He must be a righteous man because one who is himself a sinner, cannot pay for others”.

In the same Lord’s Day the question “Why must he be at the same time true God?” is answered, “He must be true God so that by the power of his divine nature he might bear in his human nature the burden of God’s wrath, and might obtain for us and restore to us righteousness and life.”

The Belgic Confession expressly mentions Arius in Article 9 as being among “false Christians and heretics”. Denying the doctrine of the Scriptures when it comes to Christ’s two natures has serious consequences for the doctrine of salvation.

Homiletical Horizons

This part of Scripture shows us how believing and humble men and women were called and enabled by God to do miraculous things. We are also amazed at the humility of the women and how they joyously receive their calling in God’s service. “I am the Lord’s servant”, Mary answered, “May it be done to me as you have said.” Life-changing events were accepted in simple faith.

None of us is called to do what Mary and Elizabeth did. But all of us should have this basic attitude: “I am the Lord’s Servant”. Identify areas in your life of which you can only say and do, “I will go with God.” Seek others (as Mary did with Elizabeth) who share the same commitment. Do not be bogged down by people who have no eye for God’s work of salvation and renewal.

Mary’s Song: the Magnificat (Luke 1:39-56)

³⁹At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴²In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”

⁴⁶And Mary said:

⁴⁷ *“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

48 *for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.*
50 *His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.*
51 *He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.*
52 *He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.*
53 *He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.*
54 *He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers.”*

⁵⁶*Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.*

(Luke 1:39-56)

Mary's song is called the "Magnificat" because the first sentence of her prophecy is "My soul glorifies the LORD", which in the Latin rendering is written as *Magnificat*. Compare with our English word "My soul magnifies the Lord". To magnify is to make great and praise joyfully. This first word already says it all: it is not about Mary; first of all it is about the Lord!

As a general note, I mention that there are in the Advent and Christmas accounts many songs. Some of the best canticles come from Scripture selections from this time. There is the Song of Mary, known as the *Magnificat*, the Song of Zechariah, known as the *Benedictus*, the Song of the Angels in Ephrathah, the *Gloria in Excelsis*, and the Song of Simeon, also known as *Nunc Dimittis*. Note that all these songs are introduced as praise songs. The festive Advent and Christmas seasons are especially meant as a time for praise unto God.

These praise songs are songs that go deep into the history of redemption. I mention this because some modern praise songs are repetitive and shallow. I like to hear a minister preach on one of these Biblical songs and let the congregation sing them with deeper understanding and renewed vigor. Some of these praise songs initially refer to individual and personal promises. See, for example, the Song of Simeon (Luke 2:29. "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace). But these songs end on a universal note: "light for the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." (2:32) An individual perspective takes on global dimensions.

Mary's song deeply recognizes the richness of the covenant that God made with Abraham. Verse 50: "His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation". Verse 54: "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to

Abraham and his descendants forever". The coming of the Saviour is ultimately a fulfilling of the covenant promise made centuries before to Abraham.

When Mary comes to Elizabeth's house she receives an amazing greeting. Not only does Elizabeth's baby leap in her womb, but she says, "But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (1:43) Elizabeth will have told Mary about the immediate physical reaction of her unborn child to Mary's unborn child. Both children are alive and cognizant of some great miracle. I find that this again shows the consistent Biblical teaching that a conceived child, though not yet born, is in every way a true and complete human being.

Elizabeth calls Mary "the mother of my Lord". This way of speaking should not escape us. Elizabeth's child will be John the Baptizer, the herald of the coming Christ. Elizabeth and her son will serve the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is not a hint of jealousy, no feeling of being slighted, but full and joyous accepting of God's will. Mary is indeed blessed because she accepted what the Lord has told her. God's promise will be accomplished.

Note again the title "The mother of my Lord". The child of Mary has not yet been born but Elizabeth already sees this child as being her Lord. She is the first to acknowledge the Messianic Kingship of our Lord Jesus Christ. She heartily acknowledges that her life and service are fully dedicated to our Lord and Saviour.

And then we read Mary's Song. It is a response to what Elizabeth has said. The enormous truth of what has befallen Mary is beginning to take shape in her mind. I mentioned this song earlier, but there are still some points to be noted.

Her first words are "My soul glorifies the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." Mary acknowledges that she has been greatly blessed to bear the Son of God. Mary and others in this time do not see God's involvement in their lives as a trial or an inconvenience but as a gift of grace. They felt deeply privileged.

As indicated earlier, the Song of Mary immediately moves on to include all the people of Israel. "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers." (1:54,55) Salvation is to be esteemed personally, but also seen as God's gift to the people of Israel. We do not stand on our own but are part of a great multitude, a chosen people.

Doctrinal Certainties

We find in this portion of Scripture two lines which must be kept together. Mary speaks about rulers being brought down from their thrones (1:52). The kingdoms of this world will not last. Only the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of heaven, as represented in and achieved by Jesus Christ, the Son of David has present power and lasting significance. In Christ we see the Kingdom of David coming to its universal completion and eternal glory. The one line is that of the Kingdom of heaven.

The second line is the fulfilment of God's covenant promises. Mary speaks about God "remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants." (1:54,55). It was in his covenant of love with Abraham that God promised his grace to Israel.⁹ The birth of the Lord Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of God's covenant promise made to the fathers of old. Faithful men like Abraham and David are mentioned because they were decisive people who served the coming of the Lord.

The Kingdom of God is secure. It continues in faithful generations who maintain the covenant of grace. The two lines (Abraham and David) come together in Christ Jesus.

Homiletical Horizons

We should not take lightly Mary's assertion that from then on "all generations will call me blessed". We must understand and explain why Mary is called blessed, also today. How can we be blessed today when it comes to serving the Christ?

We shall never place Mary on a pedestal where she does not belong. It belies her own humility to elevate her to royal status in heaven. This is the case also with the saints worshiped in the Roman Catholic Church. These saints would be appalled at the adoration they are given. Mary is called "blessed" but Scripture accords her no greater majesty or position than any other person.

This is an important principle for worship. The Heidelberg Catechism makes this clear when it explains the first commandment, "That for the sake of my very salvation I avoid and flee all idolatry witchcraft, superstition and *prayer to saints* or to other creatures (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 34, Q & A 94).

Mary's Return to Nazareth (1:56)

We read in Luke 1:56 that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for almost three months and then returned home. The three months visit was enough to share all the wonderful things that had happened and were about to happen. The two women have much to think and talk about. They will also have communicated in writing with the old priest, Zechariah. In faith and anticipation they are preparing for the decisive events to follow.

From the text we conclude that Mary leaves Elizabeth's company possibly just before the birth of John the Baptizer. This may have various reasons, but the most likely reason is that Mary wanted to escape the hustle and bustle that would certainly occur after the birth of John. She returns to Nazareth where Joseph is, and it will have been a most joyous and wonderful reunion. Soon now the Messiah of Israel will be born, and the excitement grows. The future beckons brightly as never before.

There are explainers who suggest that Mary stayed with Elizabeth until after John was born. The angel Gabriel had said that Elizabeth was in her sixth month (1:36). After three months of Mary's stay with Elizabeth she will have come full term. But Mary is not

⁹ See Clarence Stam, *The Covenant of Love*, Premier Publishing, Winnipeg, 1999.

mentioned further in Luke 1 when John is born, so she may already have left. Within the history of redemption, this is not a crucial point. It does illustrate that among the faithful in Israel who awaited the coming of the Messiah, there was communication and fellowship.

The Birth of John the Baptizer (Luke 1:57-80)

⁵⁷When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

⁵⁹On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.”

⁶¹They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”

⁶²Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child.⁶³He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” ⁶⁴Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

⁶⁷His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

*⁶⁸ “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
 because he has come and has redeemed his people.
⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
 in the house of his servant David
⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
⁷¹ salvation from our enemies
 and from the hand of all who hate us—
⁷² to show mercy to our fathers
 and to remember his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
 and to enable us to serve him without fear
⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
 for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation
 through the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
 by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness
 and in the shadow of death,
 to guide our feet into the path of peace.”*

⁸⁰And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.

(Luke 1:57-80)

The Birth of John the Baptizer (Luke 1:57-66)

Despite the mother's advanced age, the birth of John did not lead to any complications. We may see in this the providence of God. The child is born full-term. We read in 1:80, "And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel." He grew as every normal child. But we note that Elizabeth's pregnancy is straightforward. The delivery is simple, in the sense that there is nothing to note. We do read already then that John lived in the desert, east of the Jordan River.

Some explainers say that John grew up in the desert because his parents will have died when he was still very young. Did John grow up as an orphan? After all, they were aged when John was born. As reasonable as this may sound, there is no basis in Scripture for such an assumption. Other explainers suggest that John was raised by the Essenes, a religious sect that had a colony in the desert area where also the Dead Sea Scrolls were later found. This connection also has not been proven.

We read that John came to mature manhood and that he was "strong in spirit." John was focused on his task and ministry. Some conclude that living in the desert made John into a man of meditation and spirituality.¹⁰ His sojourn in the desert certainly contributed to spiritual toughness. He entered into his public ministry when he was circa 30 years old.

The "Benedictus" (Luke 1:67-80)

The birth of John has some noteworthy consequences which are meant to illustrate how significant his birth and life are. First of all, John's birth leads to the eventual termination of Zechariah's inability to speak, not immediately but at John's circumcision, eight days later. If ever there was a time for Zechariah to speak and prophesy, it is now.

The second item to note is the matter of the name that the child will receive. In the Bible names often have a special prophetic significance, and that is also the case here. It appears that neighbors and relatives want to go the path of tradition: a first-born son is "always" named after his father. But Elizabeth already knows (from her husband) what the name of the child must be, and she is very specific and adamant: No, he is to be called John! This goes back to what Gabriel said when Zechariah was serving in the temple, "You are to give him the name John." (1:13)

Deviation from a common rule in naming a child is scripturally significant. The name Zechariah means "The LORD remembers", and certainly in the birth of John God remembered his covenant of love with Israel. The name John has a similar connotation

¹⁰ Matthew makes clear that Jesus called John a "prophet", and more than a prophet, "I will send My Messenger ahead of you..." (Matthew 11:10), a quote taken from Malachi 3:1).

but it focuses more on the fact that the Lord is gracious. John's ministry will be severe and uncompromising in announcing God's judgment, but God does not forget his grace. It is a lesson that John himself will have to learn (cf. Matthew 11).

Not only did Zechariah, the old priest, confirm the name of the child, but he also broke silence. His mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. In verse 67, which introduces the *Benedictus* directly, we read that Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied! This certainly gives the *Benedictus* a special place as prophecy.

Benedictus means to be a "blessed one", favored by the Lord, sharing in immense gifts from God. This element of being "blessed" is evident especially in Zechariah's and Elizabeth's life, but it is not a personal benediction of which Zechariah speaks. The blessing extends far beyond this elderly couple and immediately includes Israel, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and redeemed his people." (1:68) We also find references in the *Benedictus* which lead us to think even farther than Israel, for Jesus Christ is the Light of the world!

When Zechariah speaks about those "living in darkness and in the shadow of death" (1:79) this is a reference to Isaiah 9:2 where it is said that God's work of salvation in Christ will extend beyond Israel to Galilee of the Gentiles. Later we will see Simeon speak in the same way. Christ's ministry does not just have local implications but truly catholic proportions. Therefore we can say "I believe a holy catholic church" (Apostles' Creed).

The scene is now set in God's providence for the birth of Christ to take place. The Bible speaks about the time of Christ's birth as "the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4) "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons". When God created all things, it was the beginning of time (Genesis 1:1), when Christ was born, it was the fullness of time, and when Christ returns it will be the perfection of time (1 Corinthians 13:10).

With this in mind we are ready to explore the Bible's account of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, as given in Luke 2.

Questions

I mentioned earlier that at the end of Luke 1, I would add some more questions. Remember, these questions are only meant as starting points for discussion.

10) Why does the Bible use the term "overshadowing" when speaking about the conception of Jesus? What is the significance for us of the statement, "I am the Lord's servant"?

11) What effect did living in Nazareth have on Jesus' life?

- 12) Why did the churches strongly condemn the false teaching of Arius? Where do we find this teaching today?
- 13) Why are there so many canticles around the time of Christ's birth?
- 14) Could Mary have been present at John's birth? Why is this unlikely?
- 15) Explain the name "Benedictus". How does this apply to us today?
- 16) What is the meaning of "advent"? What does it mean for us today?
- 17) What is perhaps the best advent text? Explain why.

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