

GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY

BELIEF OR UNBELIEF?

LUKE 1:1-38

Luke 1:1–4 (NIV) Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Your choice Belief or Unbelief

What you choose to believe determines how you live...

If ever a man wrote a book filled with good news for everybody, Dr. Luke is that man. His key message is, "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). He presents Jesus Christ as the compassionate Son of man, who came to live among sinners, love them, help them, and die for them.

In this Gospel you meet individuals as well as crowds, women and children as well as men, poor people as well as rich people, and sinners along with saints. It's a book with a message for *everybody*, because Luke's emphasis is on the universality of Jesus Christ and His salvation: "good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people" (Luke 2:10).

Dr. Luke is named only three times in the New Testament: in Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; and Philemon 24. He wrote Acts (compare Luke 1:1–4 with Acts 1:1) and traveled with Paul (note the "we" sections in Acts 16:10–17; 20:4–15; 21:1–18, and 27:1–28:16). He was probably a Gentile (compare Colossians 4:11 and 14) and was trained as a physician. No wonder he began his book with detailed accounts of the births of two important babies! No wonder he emphasized Christ's sympathy for hurting people! He wrote with the mind of a careful historian and with the heart of a loving physician.

The Gospel of Luke was written for Theophilus ("lover of God"), probably a Roman official who had trusted Christ and now needed to be established in the faith. It's also possible that Theophilus was a seeker after truth who was being taught the Christian message, because the word translated *instructed* in Luke 1:4 gives us our English word *catechumen*, "someone who is being taught the basics of Christianity."

The life and message of Christ were so important that many books had already been written about Him, but not everything in them could be trusted. Luke wrote his Gospel so that his readers might have an accurate and orderly narrative of the life, ministry, and message of Jesus Christ. Luke had carefully researched his material, interviewed eyewitnesses, and listened to those who had ministered the Word. Most important, he had the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The phrase *from the very first* (Gk. *anōthen*) can be translated "from above," as it is in John 3:31 and 19:11. It speaks of the inspiration of the Spirit of God on the message that Luke wrote.

In this first chapter, Luke tells us how God's wonderful news came to different people and how they responded to it. You will discover four different responses. Today 2 responses next week 2 more...

Luke 1:5–25 (NIV) In 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. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But 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 call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for 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 before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." The angel said to him, "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. And 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 appointed time." Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When 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. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "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."

UNBELIEF (LUKE 1:5–25)

It was indeed a dark day for the nation of Israel. The people had heard no prophetic Word from God for 400 years, not since Malachi had promised the coming of Elijah (Mal. 4:5–6). The spiritual leaders were shackled by tradition and, in some instances, corruption; and their king, Herod the Great, was a tyrant. He had nine (some say ten) wives, one of whom he had executed for no apparent reason. But no matter how dark the day, God always has His devoted and obedient people.

A faithful priest (vv. 5–7). Zacharias ("Jehovah has remembered") and Elizabeth ("God is my oath") were a godly couple who both belonged to the priestly line. The priests were divided into twenty-four courses (1 Chron. 24), and each priest served in the temple two weeks out of the year. In spite of the godlessness around them, Zacharias and Elizabeth were faithful to obey the Word of God and live blamelessly.

Their only sorrow was that they had no family, and they made this a matter of constant prayer. Little did they know that God would answer their prayers and give

them, not a priest, but a prophet! And no ordinary prophet, for their son would be the herald of the coming King!

A frightened priest (vv. 8–17). The priests on duty drew lots to see which ministries they would perform, and Zacharias was chosen to offer incense in the holy place. This was a high honor that was permitted to a priest but once in a lifetime. The incense was offered daily before the morning sacrifice and after the evening sacrifice, about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. It was probably the evening offering that was assigned to Zacharias.

You have probably noticed that God often speaks to His people and calls them while they are busy doing their daily tasks. Both Moses and David were caring for sheep, and Gideon was threshing wheat. Peter and his partners were mending nets when Jesus called them. It is difficult to steer a car when the engine is not running. When we get busy, God starts to direct us.

Luke mentions angels twenty-three times in his Gospel. There are innumerable angels (Rev. 5:11), only two of which are actually named in Scripture: Michael (Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9; Rev. 12:7) and Gabriel (Dan. 8:16; 9:21; Luke 1:19, 26). When Gabriel appeared by the altar, Zacharias was frightened, for the angel's appearance could have meant divine judgment.

"Fear not" is a repeated statement in the Gospel of Luke (1:13, 30; 2:10; 5:10; 8:50; 12:7, 32). Imagine how excited Zacharias must have been when he heard that he and Elizabeth were to have a son! "Rejoicing" is another key theme in Luke, mentioned at least nineteen times. Good news brings joy!

Gabriel instructed him to name his son John ("Jehovah is gracious") and to dedicate the boy to God to be a Nazarite all of his life (Num. 6:1–21). He would be filled with the Spirit before birth (Luke 1:41) and would be God's prophet to present His Son to the people of Israel (see John 1:15–34). God would use John's ministry to turn many people back to the Lord, just as Isaiah had promised (Isa. 40:1–5).

A fickle priest (vv. 18–22). You would think that the presence of an angel and the announcement of God's Word would encourage Zacharias' faith, but they did not. Instead of looking to God by faith, the priest looked at himself and his wife and decided that the birth of a son was impossible. He wanted some assurance beyond the plain word of Gabriel, God's messenger, perhaps a sign from God.

This, of course, was unbelief, and unbelief is something God does not accept. Zacharias was really questioning God's ability to fulfill His own Word! Had he forgotten what God did for Abraham and Sarah? (Gen. 18:9–15; Rom. 4:18–25) Did he think that his physical limitations would hinder Almighty God? But before we criticize Zacharias too much, we should examine ourselves and see how strong our own faith is.

Faith is blessed, but unbelief is judged; and Zacharias was struck dumb (and possibly deaf, Luke 1:62) until the Word was fulfilled. "I believed, and therefore have I spoken" (2 Cor. 4:13). Zacharias did not believe; therefore he could not speak. When he left the holy place, he was unable to give the priestly benediction to the people (Num. 6:22–27) or even tell them what he had seen. Indeed, God had given him a very personal "sign" that he would have to live with for the next nine months.

A favoured priest (vv. 23–25). Zacharias must have had a difficult time completing his week of ministry, not only because of his handicap, but also because

of his excitement. He could hardly wait to return “to the hill country” (Luke 1:39) where he lived, to tell his wife the good news.

God kept His promise and Elizabeth conceived a son in her old age. “There is nothing too hard for the Lord” (Jer. 32:17). Apparently the amazement and curiosity of the people forced her to hide herself even as she praised the Lord for His mercy. Not only was she to have a son, but the birth of her son was evidence that *the Messiah was coming!* These were exciting days indeed!

Luke 1:26–35 (NIV) In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He 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, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on 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. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

FAITH (LUKE 1:26–38)

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel brought a second birth announcement, this time to a young virgin in Nazareth named Mary. At least there was variety in his assignments: an old man, a young woman; a priest, a descendent of David, the king; the temple, a common home; Jerusalem, Nazareth; unbelief, faith.

The people in Judah disdained the Jews in Galilee and claimed they were not “kosher” because of their contacts with the Gentiles there (Matt. 4:15). They especially despised the people from Nazareth (John 1:45–46). But God in His grace chose a girl from Nazareth in Galilee to be the mother of the promised Messiah!

When it comes to Mary, people tend to go to one of two extremes. They either magnify her so much that Jesus takes second place (Luke 1:32), or they ignore her and fail to give her the esteem she deserves (Luke 1:48). Elizabeth, filled with the Spirit, called her “the mother of my Lord” (Luke 1:43); and that is reason enough to honor her.

What do we know about Mary? She was a Jewess of the tribe of Judah, a descendant of David, and a virgin (Isa. 7:14). She was engaged to a carpenter in Nazareth named Joseph (Matt. 13:55), and apparently both of them were poor (Lev. 12:8; Luke 2:24). Among the Jews at that time, engagement was almost as binding as marriage and could be broken only by divorce. In fact, the man and the woman were called “husband” and “wife” even before the marriage took place (compare Matt. 1:19 and Luke 2:5). Since Jewish girls married young, it is likely that Mary was a teenager when the angel appeared to her.

Mary's surprise (vv. 26–33). When you consider Gabriel's greeting, you can well understand why Mary was perplexed and afraid: "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you!" (The phrase *Blessed art thou among women* is not found here in many Greek manuscripts. You find it in Luke 1:42.) Why would an angel come to greet *her*? In what way was she "highly favored" ("greatly graced") by God? How was God with her?

Mary's response reveals her humility and honesty before God. She certainly never expected to see an angel and receive special favors from heaven. There was nothing unique about her that such things should happen. If she had been different from other Jewish girls, as some theologians claim she was, then she might have said, "Well, it's about time! I've been expecting you!" No, all of this was a surprise to her.

Gabriel then gave her the good news: she would become the mother of the promised Messiah whom she would name *Jesus* ("Jehovah is salvation"; see Matt. 1:21). Note that Gabriel affirmed both the deity and the humanity of Jesus. As Mary's son, He would be human; as Son of the Highest (Luke 1:32), He would be the Son of God (Luke 1:35). "For unto us a Child is born [His humanity], unto us a Son is given [His deity]" (Isa. 9:6). The emphasis is on the greatness of the Son (cf. Luke 1:15), not the greatness of the mother.

But He would also be a King, inherit David's throne, and reign over Israel forever! If we interpret literally what Gabriel said in Luke 1:30–31, then we should also interpret literally what he said in Luke 1:32–33. He was referring to God's covenant with David (2 Sam. 7) and His kingdom promises to the people of Israel (Isa. 9:1–7; 11–12; 61; 66; Jer. 33).

Jesus came to earth to be the Saviour of the world, but He also came to fulfill the promises God made to the Jewish fathers (Rom. 15:14). Today, Jesus is enthroned in heaven (Acts 2:29–36), but it is not on *David's* throne. One day Jesus will return and establish His righteous kingdom on earth, and then these promises will be fulfilled.

Mary's surrender (vv. 34–48). Mary knew *what* would happen, but she did not know *how* it would happen. Her question in Luke 1:34 was not an evidence of unbelief (cf. Luke 1:18); rather, it was an expression of faith. She believed the promise, but she did not understand the performance. How could a virgin give birth to a child?

First, Gabriel explained that this would be a miracle, the work of the Holy Spirit of God. Joseph, her betrothed, would not be the father of the child (Matt. 1:18–25), even though Jesus would be legally identified as the son of Joseph (Luke 3:23; 4:22; John 1:45; 6:42). It's possible that some people thought Mary had been unfaithful to Joseph and that Jesus was "born of fornication" (John 8:41). This was a part of the pain that Mary had to bear all her life (Luke 2:35).

Gabriel was careful to point out that the Baby would be a "holy thing" and would not share the sinful human nature of man. Jesus knew no sin (2 Cor. 5:21), He did no sin (1 Peter 2:22), and He had no sin (1 John 3:5). His body was prepared for Him by the Spirit of God (Heb. 10:5) who "overshadowed" Mary. That word is applied to the presence of God in the holy of holies in the Jewish tabernacle and temple (Ex. 40:35). Mary's womb became a holy of holies for the Son of God!

The angel ended his message by giving Mary a word of encouragement: her aged relative Elizabeth was with child, proving that "with God nothing shall be

impossible." God gave a similar word to Abraham when He announced the birth of Isaac (Gen. 18:14). That our God can do anything is the witness of many, including Job (Job 42:2), Jeremiah (Jer. 32:17), and even our Lord Jesus (Matt. 19:26). I personally like the translation of this verse found in the 1901 *American Standard Version*: "For no word of God shall be void of power." God accomplishes His purposes through the power of His Word (Ps. 33:9).

Mary's believing response was to surrender herself to God as His willing servant. She experienced the grace of God (Luke 1:30) and believed the Word of God, and therefore she could be used by the Spirit to accomplish the will of God. A "handmaid" was the lowest kind of female servant, which shows how much Mary trusted God. She belonged totally to the Lord, body (Luke 1:38), soul (Luke 1:46), and spirit (Luke 1:47). What an example for us to follow! (Rom. 12:1-2)

RESPONSE

Unbelief

Or

Belief?

There is no middle ground...