

Luke Chapter 1

Verses 1 to 23 Zacharias and the promise of John

Verses 26 to 38 Mary and the promise of the Lord

The author of this gospel does not identify himself but it is generally accepted to be Luke, described by Paul in Colossians 4:14 as "the beloved physician". This being the case, the writer of this gospel is also the writer of the book of Acts for the same author writes to the same man, Theophilus.

What else do we know about Luke. We learn from Acts 16 and Acts 20 that he was a companion of Paul on his missionary journeys. He also was with Paul on his last journey as he was taken as a prisoner to Rome. Not only so but he was Paul's only companion when he wrote II Timothy chapter 4. Many had deserted Paul in his prison cell, but Paul wrote in II Timothy 4:11, "Only Luke is with me".

Apart from the medical attention that he would surely be able to give to Paul, and the fact that he is the author of two major books of the New Testament, what else can we say about him? He appears not to have been a public man, in official service. But are such men of value if they can't preach? We should remember what we read in Mark chapter 3 about the Lord and His disciples. "He ordained twelve, that they should be with Him, and that He might send them forth to preach". The most important thing in those early days was to be with Him ie to be His companions. The Lord said later about these disciples, "Ye are they which have continued with Me in my temptations". Luke was such a companion with Paul, especially in his last days.

The last thing we can say about Luke is that he was a Gentile, and here in this gospel, we have the only book in the Bible written by a Gentile. It is written most probably, to a Gentile. So it is the gospel to the Gentiles. It is the gospel of the Son of man, and sets out the humanity of the Lord Jesus.

So much for the author - What was Luke's purpose in writing this book? Verse 1 sums it up for us:

Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us,

It seems that there had grown up a strong oral tradition regarding the life and times of the Lord Jesus - "the things most surely believed amongst us". As a result of this, many had sat down to write a gospel. Apart from the four gospels in our Bible, the rest of these "gospels" have long since disappeared.

But is it not a remarkable thing that not only our four gospels have been preserved but indeed the whole Bible has been preserved through the centuries. What other book is there in the world that has been compiled by over 40 different authors, in several different languages. It began to be written some 3,500 years and was completed nearly 2,000 years ago. It's accuracy of detail is also remarkable. It is reckoned that John wrote his gospel some 60 years after the death of Christ yet from chapters 13 to 17, John records at

length the words spoken by the Lord on that fateful night. Memory alone does not account for this. He was moved by the Spirit of God.

Who were Luke's sources as he gathered his material together? They were those "which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word". They had two qualities. The first is that they were "eyewitnesses". Luke's information was not received second hand. But his sources were also "ministers of the word". They were men who could handle the word of God - who could judge what was important and what was not. But above all, Luke was guided by the Spirit of God as he sat down to write.

Luke's purpose was to write "in order". It is not a chronological order of events - for that you have to go to Mark. It is rather what has been described as a "moral order". This is perfectly illustrated in chapter 3. In verse 18, we read of John the Baptist preaching. In verse 19, John is cast into prison. But in verse 20, the Lord is being baptized. Who baptized the Lord? Why John of course, the man who is in prison according to verse 19. The order is therefore "moral". If one door is closed on earth, then another door is opened in heaven.

The recipient of this gospel is described as "most excellent Theophilus". It is suggested by some that this man was a man of high standing, "most excellent". The name Theophilus means "lover of God". A man who loves God should also be a lover of the word of God, hence Theophilus is the recipient and guardian of this gospel. So often today the love of God and an interest in the word of God are seen almost as two extremes. But the reality is that you cannot have one without the other. Thus in John 14 the Lord says, "He that hath My commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me". Again in the same chapter, we read, "If a man love Me, he will keep My words". (See also Philip 1 - that your love may abound in knowledge and in all discernment: I Cor 13 - love rejoiceth in the truth: II and III John where John rejoiced to hear of those who walked in the truth).

What was to be the result of reading the gospel for Theophilus?

4 That thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.

There had been much oral instruction, but this was to be ratified by a written ministry. That he might know the "certainty" of those things.

Luke begins morally where Malachi has left off. There has been no word from God for almost 500 years. But men have not changed and the same conditions are still prevalent in the days of Zacharias. In Malachi, the Lord contends with the priests. "O priests that despise My name". They offered the blind, the torn, and the lame for sacrifice. Luke begins verse 5 with a note about the man on the throne. "There was in the days of Herod the king". With these few words, Luke has introduced us to the moral conditions prevailing at the time in Israel. The king on the throne is Herod - the man who in Matthew chapter 2 attempts to have the young child Jesus put to death. He sees this child as being a threat to his throne. Herod was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau and long-time enemies of the Jews: we remember the actions of Doeg the Edomite who killed the priests of the Lord at Nob, in the days of David and Saul. But now in Luke 1, we read that an Edomite is on the throne. In Matthew 2, the king is aided in his wicked plans

by the priests, who inform the king of where he should look for the young child.

But in the days of Malachi, there was a little remnant who feared the Lord and spoke often about His name. The Lord hearkened and a book of remembrance was written before Him. What we have in Luke chapters 1 and 2 is a page out of God's book of remembrance as we read of Zacharias and Elisabeth, Simeon and Anna, and Mary and Joseph. God still had a little remnant.

But in contrast to what is going on around him, we now read of "a certain priest named Zacharias". The name means "Jehovah remembers". His wife's name is Elisabeth, a name which means "oath of God". We put these two together and we read, "Jehovah remembers the oath of God". The Lord has remembered his promise of a Son – John is to the forerunner to this Son. God is now moving to fulfill His oath. Zacharias is said to be "of the course of Abijah". This takes us back to the days of David in I Chronicles chapters 24 to 26. David appoints 24 courses of the priests, followed by 24 courses of the singers, the porters and the captains. The purpose is "for the government of the house of God". While all around was in chaos, there is a priest still moving "in the order of his course".

The wife of Zacharias is Elisabeth who was of the "daughters of Aaron". In Leviticus chapter 21, we read of the requirements of the priests as they looked for a wife.

7 They shall not take a wife that is a whore, or profane; neither shall they take a woman put away from her husband: for he is holy unto his God.

As one would expect, the requirements for the high priest were even tighter:

13 And he shall take a wife in her virginity. 14 A widow, or a divorced woman, or profane, or an harlot, these shall he not take: but he shall take a virgin of his own people to wife.

"His own people" meant from amongst the nation of Israel ie not a Gentile. But Zacharias went even further than the requirements for the high priest. He chose a wife of the daughters of Aaron. Elisabeth's father was a priest. She knew the demands of priesthood, she lived in a home where time was measured by the calendar and clock of the sanctuary. She had left such a home behind her to marry a priest and set up a similar home to her father's.

There are of course great practical lessons we can learn from this. For someone seeking a husband or wife, it is not enough to find another Christian. We have to ask ourselves, is this someone who will be help rather than a hindrance to me in my spiritual life.

The character of this couple is given us in verse 6.

6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

"Righteous before God" is what they were in the eyes of God who could see their true character. There was a perfect balance in the spiritual character of this couple – they were both righteous. What follows regarding the commandments etc was what they were before men – "blameless". Saul of Tarsus could claim to have the second quality. Touching the righteousness of

the law, he was blameless (Philippians chapter 3), but he could not claim to be righteous before God. He calls himself an injurious person, a blasphemer, the chief of sinners.

But there had also been a great sorrow in the lives of this priest and his wife – Elisabeth was barren, and both husband and wife were now “well stricken in years”. Barrenness was often inflicted by God upon a woman as a means of judgment and disapproval, but in the case of this godly couple, it was a test of their faith.

Now in verse 8, we read of the activities of Zacharias in his priesthood. There is one word which is mentioned 3 times in 3 verses – it is the word “incense”. Incense would speak of prayer and Zacharias was a man of prayer. In Revelation chapter 5:8, we read of the 4 beasts and the 24 elders having each one of them vials full of odours which are the prayers of saints. The word for “odour” in Revelation 5 is the same word used for incense in Luke 1.

We can mention two details in passing. In verse 10, the people are “without” at the hour of incense. This is the difference between Judaism and Christianity. Under law, the priest goes into the sanctuary to represent the people who remain outside. Under grace, however, we are all priests and we can all enter the sanctuary. We have boldness to enter in by the blood of Jesus. In verse 11, the angel appears on the right side of the altar of incense. The right side is always the side of power and of favour. Jacob blessed Ephraim by crossing over his right hand to bless the younger son. The Lord Jesus is also seated on the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 1:13).

How does Zacharias react to the appearance of the angel? Verse 12 tells us – “Fear fell upon him”. This was the normal reaction of both men and women to meetings with angels. So we read in verse 30, Gabriel’s words to Mary, “Fear not, Mary”. The shepherds also in chapter 2 were filled with fear when the angel of the Lord spoke to them. There is only one person I know of in the whole New Testament who had no such fear and that is Mary Magdalene in John chapter 20. It is not that she is braver than the others. It is just that her whole being was so fixed upon Christ that she had no interest in angels. Neither was she afraid of them. “There is no fear in love – perfect love casteth out fear”.

The angel continues, “Thy prayer is heard”. I am sure that this godly couple prayed more than once for a son to be given them. But their prayers are seen as just one prayer, repeated on many occasions. God had heard this prayer and was about to grant their request. Elisabeth was to bear him a son and his name was to be John, meaning “Jehovah is gracious”.

In verses 15 to 17, certain things are mentioned regarding John. “He shall be great in the sight of the Lord”. Later, when speaking to Mary, Gabriel says, “He shall be great”. There is no need to add “in the sight of the Lord”, for Jesus is the Lord. He would also be a Nazarite and would drink neither wine nor strong drink. One can see how appropriate this was for John, for his ministry was a stern one, calling upon men to repent and confess their sins.

The Nazarite vow covered a number of things. No razor would touch his head. This was the outward sign of the Nazarite. It was what marked Samson, until he revealed the secret of his strength to Delilah. They had to touch no dead

thing. Then there was the abstinence from wine or strong drink. The message of John was a stern one for Israel. He preached a message of confession and repentance of sins. John himself was solemn in his appearance. He was in the wilderness as he preached, a man clothed in camel's skins and eating locusts and wild honey.

Also in verse 15, it is said that he would be filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb. It is never said of the Lord Jesus that He was filled with the Spirit for this would suggest that there might have been a time when He was less than filled with the Spirit. The Lord was full of the Holy Spirit and this was always true of Him.

John would cause many to turn to the Lord. He would go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah. John did no miracle like Elijah but his ministry was very akin to that of Elijah ie an earnestness and zeal for the things of God, and a sternness in his ministry with an emphasis upon the judgment of God. In these ways, he was like the OT prophet.

In verse 18, Zacharias questions the words of Gabriel. "I am an old man etc". For this, he is struck dumb, and remained so until the child was about to be named. One might well ask the question, "Did not Mary do the same, yet no judgment falls upon her. Is God unjust? The answer is that Zacharias had a precedent in the word of God for what the angel had promised. Abraham and Sarah were in the same situation, indeed they were probably older than Zacharias and Elisabeth. Yet God gave them a son in their old age. Could not God do likewise for Zacharias and Elisabeth? Mary, on the other hand, had no such precedent in the scriptures and so she was allowed to ask the question.

But Zacharias is not alone in this sin of unbelief. In Acts chapter 12, Peter was in prison facing execution. The church is gathered in the house to pray for Peter. Their prayer is answered as Peter is released from prison is outside knocking on the door. The knock is answered by Rhoda who goes to tell the company, but she is met with unbelief. It is his angel or his spirit, they say – it cannot possibly be Peter. But do we not commit the same error as these men? We pray for things to happen, but do we really believe that God can answer our prayer? James tells us in his epistle that a double minded man is unstable in all his ways. We are to ask in faith, nothing doubting.

In verse 19, the angel introduces himself. "I am Gabriel that stand in the presence of God". Gabriel is one of a select band of named angels in the Bible – there are only four in total. We read of Lucifer, Michael, Gabriel, and Apolyon, the angel of the bottomless pit. We have already come across Gabriel in the prophecy of Daniel, chapters 8 and 9. There he is sent by God to reveal to Daniel the great purpose of God for future Gentile kingdoms and for the nation of Israel. Now in Luke, he is sent to announce the arrival of the forerunner of the Messiah and the Messiah Himself. He has come from the very presence of God. The wonderful thing about the Christian today is that we are nearer to God than even Gabriel. We deduce this by comparing the preposition used by Gabriel in this verse with that used by Paul in Ephesians 1:4. Gabriel used the word ENOPION which means "in the presence of". In Ephesians 1, Paul says of us that we are "holy and without blame before Him in love". "Before" is KATENOPION, which means "in the immediate presence of" or "before His

face". We are nearer to God than Gabriel. The angel also speaks of standing in the presence of God. He stands as a courtier in the royal palace, but we are seated as sons in the presence of the King.

Because of his unbelief, Zacharias is struck dumb. He also tarried in the temple longer than expected, so when he came out, speechless, the people perceived that he had seen a vision of an angel. Verse 22 tells something more about this man. He has seen the vision of an angel, he has been promised a son, and he has been struck dumb – all miraculous events, but he remains at the temple until the days of his service were over. He is marked by consistency and loyalty.

In verse 26, Gabriel is sent again, this time to Nazareth in Galilee. Here one would find the true heir to David's throne, not Herod but a humble carpenter named Joseph. But the angel in Luke comes, not to Joseph, but to Mary his wife. Gabriel greets Mary with the words, "Hail thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee, Blessed art thou among women". Mary was indeed highly favoured, But so also are we. Paul uses the same word for us in Ephesians 2. We are "accepted" in the beloved One, we are "highly favoured" in the Beloved. We have been blessed with every kind of spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ.

Mary is called "blessed" no less than 4 times in this chapter, by Gabriel in verse 28, twice by Elisabeth in verses 42 and 45, then once by herself in verse 48. Mary is indeed a blessed woman, and we must give her the honour that she is due, but she must not be honoured at the expense of the Lord Jesus. In Matthew chapter 2, we read 5 times over of the "young child and His mother", not the mother and child as in some religious circles. Even as a child, the Lord must come first. It is significant that the last mention of Mary is in Acts chapter 1. We read of those gathered together in a room, first the 11 disciples, then the women (the women who followed Him from Galilee no doubt), then Mary, and finally His brethren.

Gabriel tells Mary about the birth of her child. Just as Gabriel named the future child of Zacharias as John, so now Gabriel tells Mary that her child was to be called "Jesus". This name means "Jehovah the saviour". In Matthew chapter 1, an angel appears to Joseph and likewise gives the command, "Thou shalt call His name Jesus for He shall save His people from their sins".

The angel promises this child the throne of His father David. This was not given at His first advent but the promise will be fulfilled at His second advent. His kingdom will be like no other. It will be endless both in terms of time and extent. There never has been a kingdom like it.

Mary asks the question, "How shall this be?". She is not struck dumb like Zacharias for a virgin had never conceived before. The Holy Spirit would come upon her. She is told also, "That holy thing that shall be born shall be called the Son of God". The words "of thee", as found in the AV, are omitted by many translators and commentators. It is as if the Spirit of God is playing down the role of Mary in all this. She was the medium through whom the child would be born. Only a virgin birth could keep this child free from the curse of sin in Adam's race.

This was no ordinary child in another respect. He would be called the Son of

God. It is not that He became the Son at His birth as some would say but that He would be known as such at His birth. We know that He is the eternal Word, as per John 1:1. But how do we know that He is the eternal Son? The key verse is in John's first epistle. "The Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world". The Father did not send the Word but rather He sent the Son. He was the Son before He came.

Note the response of Mary. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord". She submitted herself to the will of God. This no doubt led her to suffer much reproach. Who would believe her story of a virgin birth? Even Joseph didn't and in Matthew we read of how he was minded to put her away privily. It took a further intervention from the angel of the Lord to persuade Joseph to take Mary to be his wife. Mary perhaps still lived with the stigma all her for over thirty years later, we hear men say to the Lord Jesus, "We be not born of fornication".

Mary is the classic illustration of Romans 12:1. There, Paul beseeches his readers to present their bodies as a living sacrifice to God. That is exactly what Mary did when she said, "Be it unto me according to thy word".