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Hear the Good News!

Luke 1

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" (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" (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

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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 verse 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 upon 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.

1. Unbelief (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 remem-

bered") and Elisabeth ("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 Elisabeth 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 fearful 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

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Zacharias must have been when he heard that he and Elisabeth 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 (v. 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 faithless 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, v. 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 favored 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" (v. 39), where he lived, to tell his wife the good news.

God kept His promise and Elisabeth 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!

2. Faith (1:26-38)

In the sixth month of Elisabeth'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 (v. 32), or they ignore her and fail to give her the esteem she deserves (v. 48). Elisabeth, filled with the Spirit, called her "the mother of my Lord" (v. 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 (Luke 2:24; Lev. 12:8). 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 v. 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 (v. 32), He would be the Son of God (v. 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. 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 verses 30-31, then we should also interpret literally

what he said in verses 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 verse 34 was not an evidence of unbelief (cf. v. 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 Elisabeth was with child, proving that "with God nothing shall be impossible." God gave a similar word to Abraham when He announced the

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birth of Isaac (Gen. 18:14). That our God can do anything is the witness of many, including Job (42:2), Jeremiah (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 (v. 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 (v. 38), soul (v. 46) and spirit (v. 47). What an example for us to follow! (Rom. 12:1-2)

3. Joy (1:39-56)

Now that Mary knew she was to become a mother, and that her kinswoman Elisabeth would give birth in three months, she wanted to see Elisabeth so they could rejoice together. "Joy" is the major theme of this section as you see three persons rejoicing in the Lord.

First is the joy of Elisabeth (vv. 39-45). As Mary entered the house, Elisabeth heard her greeting, was filled with the Spirit and was told by the Lord why Mary was there. The one word that filled her lips was "blessed." Note that she did not say that Mary *was* blessed *above* women but *among* women, and certainly this is true. While we don't want to ascribe to Mary that which only belongs to God, neither do we want to minimize her place in the plan of God.

The thing that Elisabeth emphasized was Mary's *faith*: "Blessed is she that believed" (v. 45). We are saved "by grace . . . through faith" (Eph. 2:8-9). Because Mary believed the Word of God, she experienced the power of God.

Second, there was the joy of the unborn son, John (vv. 41

and 44). This was probably the time when he was filled with the Spirit as the angel had promised (v. 15). Even before his birth, John rejoiced in Jesus Christ, just as he did during his earthly ministry (John 3:29-30). As John the Baptist, he would have the great privilege of introducing the Messiah to the Jewish nation.

Third, there was the joy of Mary (vv. 46-56), a joy that compelled her to lift her voice in a hymn of praise. The fullness of the Spirit should lead to joyful praise in our lives (Eph. 5:18-20), and so should the fullness of the Word (Col. 3:16-17). Mary's song contains quotations from and references to the Old Testament Scriptures, especially the Psalms and the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. Mary hid God's Word in her heart and turned it into a song.

This song is called "The Magnificat" because the Latin version of verse 46 is "Magnificat anima mea Dominum." Her great desire was to magnify the Lord, not herself. She used the phrase *He hath* eight times as she recounted what God had done for three recipients of His blessing.

What God did for Mary (vv. 46-49). To begin with, God had saved her (v. 47), which indicates that Mary was a sinner like all of us and needed to trust the Lord for her eternal salvation. Not only had He saved her, but He had also chosen her to be the mother of the Messiah (v. 48). He had "regarded" her, which means He was mindful of her and looked with favor upon her. No doubt there were others who could have been chosen, but God chose her! The Lord had indeed showered His grace upon her (see 1 Cor. 1:26-28).

Not only was God mindful of her, but He was also mighty for her, working on her behalf (v. 49). Mary would have no problem singing "Great Things He Hath Done!" (See Luke 8:39; 1 Sam. 12:24; 2 Sam. 7:21-23; and Ps. 126:2-3.) Because she believed God and yielded to His will, He performed a miracle in her life and used her to bring the Saviour into the world.

What God did for us (vv. 50-53). In the second stanza of her song, Mary included *all* of God's people who fear Him from generation to generation. We have all received His mercy and experienced His help. Mary named three specific groups to whom God had been merciful: the helpless (v. 51), the humble (v. 52), and the hungry (v. 53).

The common people of that day were almost helpless when it came to justice and civil rights. They were often hungry, downtrodden, and discouraged (Luke 4:16-19), and there was no way for them to "fight the system." A secret society of patriotic Jewish extremists called "the zealots" used violent means to oppose Rome, but their activities made matters only worse.

Mary saw the Lord turning everything upside down: the weak dethrone the mighty, the humble scatter the proud, the nobodies are exalted, the hungry are filled, and the rich end up poor! The grace of God works contrary to the thoughts and ways of this world system (1 Cor. 1:26-28). The church is something like that band of men that gathered around David (1 Sam. 22:2).

What God did for Israel (vv. 54-55). "He shall save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). In spite of Israel's destitute condition, the nation was still God's servant and He would help the people fulfill His purposes. God was on Israel's side! He would remember His mercy and keep His promises (Ps. 98:1-3; also see Gen. 12:1-3; 17:19; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). Were it not for Israel, Jesus Christ could not have been born into the world.

Mary stayed with Elisabeth until John was born, and then she returned to Nazareth. By then, it was clear that she was pregnant, and no doubt the tongues began to wag. After all, she had been away from home for three months; and why, people were likely asking, had she left in such a hurry? It was then that God gave the good news to Joseph and instructed him what to do (Matt. 1:18-25).

4. Praise (1:57-80)

God's blessing was resting abundantly on Zacharias and Elisabeth. He sent them a baby boy, just as He promised; and they named him "John" just as God had instructed. The Jews looked upon children as a gift from God and a "heritage from the Lord" (Pss. 127:3-5 and 128:1-3), and rightly so, for so they are. Israel would not follow the practices of their pagan neighbors by aborting or abandoning their children. When you consider that 1,500,000 babies are aborted each year in the United States alone, you can see how far we have drifted from the laws of God.

"The greatest forces in the world are not the earthquakes and the thunderbolts," said Dr. E.T. Sullivan. "The greatest forces in the world are babies."

Traditionally, a baby boy would be named after his father or someone else in the family; so the relatives and neighbors were shocked when Elisabeth insisted on the name *John*. Zacharias wrote "His name is John" on a tablet, and that settled it! Immediately God opened the old priest's mouth, and he sang a hymn that gives us four beautiful pictures of what the coming of Jesus Christ to earth really means.

The opening of a prison door (v. 68). The word *redeem* means "to set free by paying a price." It can refer to the releasing of a prisoner or the liberating of a slave. Jesus Christ came to earth to bring "deliverance to the captives" (Luke 4:18), salvation to people in bondage to sin and death. Certainly we are unable to set ourselves free; only Christ could pay the price necessary for our redemption (Eph. 1:7; 1 Peter 1:18-21).

The winning of a battle (vv. 69-75). In Scripture, a horn symbolizes power and victory (1 Kings 22:11; Ps. 89:17, 24). The picture here is that of an army about to be taken captive, but then help arrives and the enemy is defeated. In the previous picture, the captives were set free; but in this picture, the enemy is defeated so *that he cannot capture more prisoners*.

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It means total victory for the people of God.

The word *salvation* (vv. 69, 71) carries the meaning of "health and soundness." No matter what the condition of the captives, their Redeemer brings spiritual soundness. When you trust Jesus Christ as Saviour, you are delivered from Satan's power, moved into God's kingdom, redeemed and forgiven (Col. 1:12-14).

Where did the Redeemer come from? He came from the house of David (v. 69), who himself was a great conqueror. God had promised that the Saviour would be a Jew (Gen. 12:1-3), from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10), from the family of David (2 Sam. 7:12-16), born in David's city, Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Both Mary (1:27) and Joseph (Matt. 1:20) belonged to David's line. The coming of the Redeemer was inherent in the covenants God made with His people (v. 72), and it was promised by the prophets (v. 70).

Note that the results of this victory are sanctity and service (vv. 74-75). He sets us free, not to do our own will, because that would be bondage, but to do His will and enjoy His freedom.

The canceling of a debt (vv. 76-77). "Remission" means "to send away, to dismiss, as a debt." All of us are in debt to God because we have broken His law and failed to live up to His standards (Luke 7:40-50). Furthermore, all of us are spiritually bankrupt, unable to pay our debt. But Jesus came and paid the debt for us (John 1:29; Ps. 103:12).

The dawning of a new day (vv. 78-79). "Dayspring" means "sunrise." The people were sitting in darkness and death, and distress gripped them when Jesus came; but He brought light, life, and peace. It was the dawn of a new day because of the tender mercies of God (see Matt. 4:16).

The old priest had not said anything for nine months, but he certainly compensated for his silence when he sang this song of praise to God! And how joyful he was that his son was chosen by God to prepare the way for the Messiah (Isa.

40:1-3; Mal. 3:1). John was "prophet of the Highest" (v. 76), introducing to Israel "the Son of the Highest" (v. 32) who was conceived in Mary's womb by "the power of the Highest" (v. 35).

Instead of enjoying a comfortable life as a priest, John lived in the wilderness, disciplining himself physically and spiritually, waiting for the day when God would send him out to prepare Israel for the arrival of the Messiah. People like Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-38) had been waiting for this day for many years, and soon it would come.

God calls us today to believe His Good News. Those who believe it experience His joy and want to express their praise to Him. It is not enough for us to say that Jesus is *a* Saviour, or even *the* Saviour. With Mary, we must say, "My spirit hath rejoiced in God *my* Saviour" (Luke 1:47, italics mine).