

The Old Man and the Angel *Luke 1:1-20, 77-79*

We do not know very much about the man. Just bare bones facts. His name was Luke. He was a physician by trade and a slave by circumstance. And somehow, he found freedom.

But he was not free for long. He enlisted as a bondsman of Jesus Christ. Then, unwilling to sit on the sidelines, he became a missionary and both a faithful friend and traveling companion of Paul the apostle.

However, there is one thing we do know about Luke. He was also a first class historian. And in that capacity, he dedicated himself to researching and recording the story of our Savior's life here on earth.

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.
Luke 1:1-4

Luke was a man of letters: educated and literate. His Greek is the best in the Bible. It is cultured and crafted, impeccable and eloquent. But you would not know that by reading the first chapter of his Gospel.

In contrast to virtually everything else Luke wrote, this first chapter has a decidedly Hebrew tone. It was as if these opening stories came from the lips of someone who did not know Greek at all.

And so they did. Without a doubt, Luke wrote this chapter after long talks with none other than the Master's mother. After all, no one else in all the world could have known the intimate details of the days before God's Son was born.

And no one else knew the grace and glory God poured into the lives of ordinary people during those days.

God's Plan

Four long centuries dragged by. Wars raged. Generals conquered. Dictators and despots ruled. Kingdoms rose and fell. And all that time, the heavens were silent. But that was about to change. God had an eternal plan for mankind. And He was ready to put it into action.

On his death bed, Jacob spoke about that glorious plan. Before he died, the patriarch uttered prophecies concerned each of his sons. And Judah, he said, would sit on the throne of Israel and rule as king.

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, Genesis 49:10

That was the great and glorious hope which gleamed in the hearts of God's people. One day, Shiloh, God's Servant, the root of Jesse, the Messiah would come.

Until then, every king over God's people would be a descendant of Judah. That is how they would know the Messiah was at the door.

And so it was. Starting with David, every Jewish king was a member of the tribe of Judah. After the Babylonians battered down Jerusalem's gate and carried God's people away as slaves, pagan politicians, despots and dictators ruled over Israel from time to time.

But they were all foreigners. Every Jewish king could trace his ancestry back to Judah. But then the Romans forced a new king upon the people who lived in the province Rome called Judea.

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Verse 5

Herod was not born a Jew. He was a descendant of Jacob's brother, Esau. However, he became a convert to Judaism. That made him the very first Jewish king who was not a descendant of Judah.

Hebron was a collection of khaki colored cubes, tucked back in a horseshoe of hills a day's journey south of Jerusalem. Somewhere on a cobbled side street of that city, an old priest named Zacharias lived with his wife, Elizabeth.

Life was slow and simple for Zacharias. Long years had lined his face and slowed his step. But still he carried out the rites and rituals, the ceremonies and sacrifices left to the Levites by Moses' law.

He studied the Scriptures. But somehow the significance Jacob's ancient prophecy eluded the old man. So he did not realize that Shiloh, the Savior Jacob promised would come one day, was at the door. Neither did he foresee his own important part in God's glorious plan.

It began when Zacharias journeyed to Jerusalem. Late in the spring of each year, it was his priestly division's turn to serve at the temple.

Each year, that army of priests began by drawing lots to see where each of them would serve. Zacharias had always drawn a lot that sent him into the shadows. But not this year. God not only had a plan for Israel and all of mankind. He also had a plan for the old priest.

Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. Verses 8-9

The law of Moses commanded that incense be burned in the temple sanctuary each morning and evening. And offering that incense was both a high honor and a treasured privilege.

It was a once in a lifetime honor for Zacharias. Deep inside the temple sanctuary right in front of the heavy veil that hid the inner most chamber, the Holy of Holies, an altar for incense waited for the old priest.

Once again, it is doubtful Zacharias realized it. But the lot had not fallen in his favor by accident. The unseen hand of God had guided it his way. That too was part of His plan.

Zacharias had an appointment to keep. And so it was. Alone inside the holy place of the temple, an angel appeared to the old priest.

And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering. And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. Verses 10-11

Most likely, Zacharias had never been inside the sanctuary before. And the sudden appearance of a shining man in white, stunned and scared him.

Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John." Verses 12-13

The old priest had never been to the great eternal temple in Heaven, either. But he was no stranger there. The Lord of all creation knew his name, understood his every longing, and remembered every forgotten prayer.

It is the glorious truth of the Gospel that God also knows your name. He knows all about you. And he has a wonderful plan for your life.

He had a plan for Zacharias. And He also had a plan for the baby boy who would bless the old man's home.

You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. Verses 14-15

God's plan preceded that baby's very existence. From his mother's womb, the Lord's holy hand would be upon him. That was also God's message to Jeremiah.

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; Jeremiah 1:5

That was true of Zacharias' son, the man people would come to call John the Baptist. And it is the same with you and me.

Zacharias and his son are bookends; they are extreme examples. God's plan began for the old priest late in life. And it began for his son while he was still an unborn infant.

That is one lesson Luke would have us learn. The great God of eternity has a wonderful plan for each of us. And it is neither too early nor too late to set off on that glorious adventure of serving our eternal Savior.

God's Power

God dealt with Zacharias as He always deals with those He would touch and transform, with those He chooses to take part in His eternal plan. First, He announces His intentions, quite often promising the impossible.

That is what happened with the old priest. The Creator sent an angel all the way from Heaven to deliver a simple message to Zacharias. He and his wife would soon have a son.

In the same way, God sent an angel to Gideon. Gideon was a frightened farm boy, scanning the horizon and nervously trying to winnow wheat deep down in a winepress.

God sent that angel to tell the farm boy He had chosen him to lead an army and defeat Israel's wicked enemies. In that moment, the Lord expected Gideon to react just as He expected Zacharias to respond.

When God speaks to us, through His written Word or the inner voice of His Spirit, He expects us to believe His promises. But that is just what Zacharias could not seem to do.

Zacharias said to the angel, "How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years." Verse 18

Translated literally, the old priest's reply is even more surprising. He asked the angel, "According to what will I know this for certain?"

What Zacharias wanted was a sign, some miracle he could cling to: a hook he could hang his feeble faith upon. It was not enough that God had led the lot to fall the priest's way so he would be alone in the temple. Neither was it enough that God sent an angel all the way from Heaven just to speak with him.

Zacharias had the same problem many of us do. He simply could not or would not take God at His Word. He had to have a sign. And that, Jesus said, is a mark of deep depravity.

An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah. Matthew 16:4

Yes, Zacharias and his wife were elderly. And yes, it is not merely unusual or unlikely for the aged to have children; it is impossible. But if we are to experience the awesome power of God, we cannot be unwilling to believe the impossible.

And for good reason. The Bible repeatedly reminds us that our Lord's power is not limited by what we imagine is impossible.

Is anything too difficult for the Lord? Genesis 11:6

Ah Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You, Jeremiah 32:17

...with God all things are possible. Matthew 19:26

...nothing will be impossible with God. Luke 1:37

The things that are impossible with people are possible with God. Luke 18:27

During His days on earth, our Savior had little patience with people who could not and would not take God at His Word. And the shining angel who lit up the temple sanctuary did not either.

The angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news." Verse 19

The angel who delivered God's message to Zacharias was not merely an angel. He was the archangel Gabriel: the same angel who spoke to Daniel.

He spent every moment in the personal presence of the great God of eternity. And he was insulted by the priest's lack of faith.

The message he brought was from the very throne of God. And He expected Zacharias to receive and believe it.

God's Holy Word in the Bible is also a message from the throne of God. And we are to receive it and believe it, obey it and act upon it. It is the one and only path to experiencing God's great power in our lives. It is the minimal requirement every man must meet to please the Lord.

...without faith it is impossible to please Him, Hebrews 11:6

God's Purpose

Zacharias demanded that the angel give him a sign, some sort of proof the heavenly messenger was not lying or simply speaking sweet sounding words of comfort. So Gabriel gave the old priest what he wanted.

And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time. Verse 20

The priests who waited outside the sanctuary for Zacharias were stunned when the old man finally appeared at the door. His face was blanched and bloodless. And he gestured wildly with his hands. He could not speak.

And that was a great tragedy. For the first time in his life, the old priest had something to tell people. He had stood face to face with an angel from Heaven. And he had heard glorious news about the baby that would soon bless his home.

And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Verses 16-17

The marvelous mission God gave John is much the same as the work He would have Christians do today. John was to proclaim that Christ the Creator was coming to earth. And so are we.

We are to tell people that one day very soon the skies will split and roll back like a scroll. And the Son of God will thunder out of the heavens.

Many people laughed at John when he shouted his message there beside the reeds and rushes of the Jordan. And people will also laugh at us when we tell them that Jesus is coming again. But like John, we are not responsible for how people respond. We are merely to tell them the message.

John was to tell people that God's Son was coming. But that was not all he was to tell them. After John was born, his father held his baby boy in his arms. Zacharias smiled down at his son and spoke of another message the boy would bear.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways; to give to His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. Verses 76-79

John was to prepare the hearts of men to welcome the Messiah. If He came and found them filled with sin and selfishness, His appearing would not be a blessing but a curse.

I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse. Malachi 4:5-6

Christ commanded us to rejoice that He is coming soon. But the Bible declares that some people will greet Jesus' return with terror instead of joy.

Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" Revelation 6:15-17

Only the forgiven will welcome Christ's coming. That was true in John's day. And it is just as true in ours.

That is why John the Baptist was commanded to tell people about the tenderness, the mercy and kindness of God. And that is also why we are commanded to bear that same glorious good news.

We are to tell all men that the great God of Heaven loves them. Indeed, He loves mankind so much He sent His beloved, only begotten Son to pay the price of blood and death their sins justly deserve.

Our Savior's Spirit would have us call to those who are in darkness just as John the Baptist did. Then and now, men and women wear the shackles of sin and serve the merciless prince of darkness. And God's great heart aches for them.

We are to tell them that they do not have to live in defeat, despair and death, dreading the day when they are plunged into the horror and pain of eternal darkness.

Jesus shed His blood as the pure and perfect Lamb of God. And His blood can set anyone free. No matter how long they have strayed or dark their sins may be, they can live a life with peace and joy that is as eternal in depth as it is in length.

That is our message. And we must not be discouraged and deterred when people prefer the sparkle of sin's sequins to the rubies and rainbows of light that fills those who love and live for Christ and Christ alone.

People crowded the dusty road and hiked through the stifling heat from Jerusalem down to the tropical trench where the green waters of the Jordan trickled down to the Dead Sea. There, they listened as John delivered the message of God's great love.

Tragically, most of them walked back up the mountain road to Jerusalem unchanged. They chose not to believe the message.

But John's ministry was not diminished by their unbelief. Then and now, even if people choose not to believe the glorious good news of God's love, they have the right to be told.

And if we do not tell them, no one will.