

THE PROLOGUE - 1:1-4

1:1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us,

1:2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,

The Gospel of Luke is a compilation of events about the life and person of Jesus that was written for Theophilus; it is about the things accomplished among the eye witnesses, and about the things handed down to them. The verb “accomplished” is a passive voice and shows that Luke sees God as the One who has brought these things to pass; they are things that were accomplished among them by God (Marshall, 41; Edwards, 24). Luke is not just telling a story of what happened; he is giving the history of what God has done concerning Jesus Christ.

Luke joined Paul in Troas during his second missionary journey (Acts 16:10), so from that point on he was himself an eyewitness; however, he wasn’t an eyewitness to the events that he recorded in Luke. Nevertheless, he, like other ancient historians, believed that the writing of history required that the writer either be an eyewitness or have access to eyewitnesses.

Luke’s record comes from those who were present “from the beginning” and became “servants of the word.” Acts records this transformation from eyewitnesses to servants (Garland, 53). As “servants of the word” they were not propagating their own views but served God by faithfully telling what had taken place.

“By referring to eyewitnesses, Luke affirms the Christian faith is rooted in historical reliability and not the imagined speculations or myths that characterized the contemporary mystery religions. They are historically verified and are made public to all, not just to initiates. But mere historical research is insufficient to bring certainty of the truth. It also requires ‘theological understanding’” (Garland, 58). As Warfield has said, “no public historical happening, as such (an exodus, a conquest, a captivity, a crucifixion, an empty tomb), can reveal God apart from an accompanying word from God to explain it” (ISBE, under “revelation”). As God guides his thoughts, Luke will be the link who interprets the meaning of the history of Jesus.

1:3 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;

1:4 so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

Luke carefully investigated everything before writing anything down and when he did write, he did so in an orderly fashion. His research starts with the historical events that preceded Jesus’ birth (from the beginning) and ends with the resurrection.

The word “orderly” modifies the verb “write.” Luke is not saying that the account is in chronological order; he is saying that he is putting everything together in an orderly way; he is arranging everything in a way that will be coherent and accomplish his purposes. The ESV translation is better here: “it seemed

good to me . . . to write an orderly account for you. . . ." The order is designed to be persuasive, to impress certain truths upon the reader. The Gospel of Luke follows the pattern of Peter's speech in Acts 11:1-17 where he gave the Jews a point-by-point account of what had happened to him, but didn't follow the chronology of the event precisely. Peter's speech was called "orderly" (Acts 11:4) not because it was in chronological order but because it conveyed his point in a coherent way and fulfilled the purpose he was trying to achieve. Luke is "concerned to show that the career of Jesus was a series of divine acts" (Marshall, 40). Or, as Garland says, "Luke will articulate his theological vision through narrative, and he fashions the narrative's unity 'by the display of major developments and patterns'" (Garland, 55).

History for Luke is not merely one thing after another that has a purpose and is moving somewhere. The events he records are not mere occurrences but are things that have filled up or fulfilled something. They are momentous and epoch-making and attain a goal. The reader, then, needs to be aware of a larger context to understand the story. It is a continuation of God's long history of dealing with Israel and the world since "the foundation of the world" (11:50). These events fulfill Scripture (27:27, 44) and lead to salvation.

Luke's history is, therefore, wholly different from other histories. Du Plessis writes: "his purpose was not to draw important lessons from history, as it was the case with other Greek historians, but to serve Christianity with a true report of *God acting in history*." These are sacred events that manifest and fulfill God's plan for the salvation of the world (Garland, 57).

It is possible that Theophilus was someone of importance for he is addressed as "most excellent Theophilus" (see Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25). But the certainty of this is often overstated, and as Garland points out, "most excellent" could also be just a respectful term (Garland, 56; also Edwards, 27). Luke writes to Theophilus so that he could know the exact truth about the things he had been taught. In other words, Theophilus possessed either incomplete knowledge or inaccurate knowledge which Luke was attempting to help him with. It is hard to know if he was a believer who needed to be more accurately taught, or an unbeliever who was seeking to know more about Christianity. Because Theophilus means "lover of God" some take it as metaphor of the reader: "if you love God, this is written for you." However, it wasn't the custom in ancient times to dedicate books to imaginary people (Edwards, 27) and "most excellent" suggests an actual person (Liefeld, 823).

Behind the translation, "exact truth" is the idea of security or safety (Marshall, 44). The word is used in Acts 5:23: "We found the prison securely locked." In 1 Thessalonians 5:3: "While people are saying, 'There is peace and safety', then sudden destruction will come upon them." Luke wants to make the truth secure, unshakable, and stable. Once again, the ESV is a better translation here; it says, "that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."

THE ANNOUNCEMENT TO ZACHARIAS - 1:5-25

The information in this section is unique to Luke and deals with the origin of John the Baptist and the events that lead up to his birth.

1:5 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.

1:6 They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.

1:7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.

The narrative begins with a priest named Zacharias (Zechariah in Hebrew, meaning Yahweh remembers) who lived near the end of the reign of Herod the Great (37-4 b.c.). Zacharias was married to Elizabeth who was the daughter of a priest. Though a priest was required to marry a virgin, he was not required to marry someone of a priestly family, so Elizabeth was a special blessing.

Many of the prophets also introduce their books in their own historical contexts, demonstrating that God is fulfilling His promises in history and what is recorded is not some sort of myth.

“In Luke's account, the kings and governors play no direct role in the story's action and serve only as chronological ciphers (3:1-2) or as those issuing decrees from afar (2:1). Busy with their own affairs, they take no note of the birth of John or Jesus that will turn their world upside down. The vital characters in the story are unknowns: an ordinary priest and his aging wife; a young peasant girl and a Jewish man who has to register to pay his taxes; shepherds, a despised class; and two prophets, male and female, who hang out in the temple waiting for God's intervention” (Garland, 64).

Zacharias and Elizabeth were characterized as people who were both upright and faithful in following the law. “Upright” shows that their obedience was from the heart, not just external observance of the law. The consistency of their walk with God was indisputable (the present tense verb indicates a habitual pattern of life). This made their childless state even harder to understand, for people believed that God blessed faithful people with children (Gen. 1:28; Ps 127:3-5, 128:1-4; Lk. 1:25). The mention of their age (Lk. 1:7) probably indicated that people assumed that it was too late for this couple to have a child, barring a miracle of God (Morris, 75). Their situation in many ways parallels that of Abraham and Sarah.

1:8 Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division,

1:9 according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

1:10 And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.

The priests were divided into twenty-four divisions (that were named for Aaron's 24 descendants -1 Chron. 24:1-19); each division serving at the temple twice a year for a week, as well as at the major festivals (Lk. 1:8; Morris, 75). Because there were more priests (18,000 – Marshall, 54) than there were daily duties for them to perform, lots were cast to assign each priest a task. Being chosen to offer incense was considered a great privilege which a priest was only allowed to do once in his lifetime. Some

never had the opportunity at all (Morris, 76; Liefeld, 826). Incense was offered daily at the morning and evening sacrifices and though we do not know which one this was, it was no doubt the most important day of Zechariah's life. He would enter the Holy Place with two other priests carrying the coals from the altar. Then they would leave him alone and pray outside with the daily worshippers while the incense was offered (Lk. 1:10). The altar of incense stood in front of the Holy of Holies. Zechariah's task was to place the powdered incense on the glowing coals. The rising smoke symbolized prayer rising to God, so after laying the incense on the coals, the priest would prostrate himself in prayer (cf. my study notes on Hebrews, Appendix 4) while the people prayed outside.

1:11 And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense.

1:12 Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him.

As Zacharias was in the holy place, an angel appeared by the altar of incense, most likely between it and the golden candlestick on the south side of the holy place (Bock, 80). Only a heavenly being had the right to be in the holy place with the priest. Zacharias was startled and gripped with fear, a common reaction toward heavenly beings (cf. Lk. 1:29-30; 5:8-10; 9:34; Jdg. 6:22f; 13:6, 22; II Sam. 6:9; Isa 6:5; Dan. 8:16ff; 10:10; Mat. 28:2; Mk. 16:5; Acts 2;43; 5;5, 11; 19:17; Rev. 1:17 etc.).

1:13 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.

The angel first reassures Zacharias that he need not be afraid for he brought him good news; Zechariah's "prayer has been heard." Zacharias and Elizabeth had been asking for a son. God would answer their prayers. However, there may be a deeper meaning as well. In Greek, a specific prayer is in view, not simply a response to an ongoing request. The prayer the angel could be referring to may be the one Zacharias had just prayed while offering the incense. It is doubtful that a priest would make a personal request for a child at such an important moment; he would be focused on his priestly duties as a mediator between God and the nation. It therefore seems more probable that Zacharias was praying for the redemption of Israel and so the angelic announcement was not simply to tell Zacharias that his prayers for a child were answered, but that the redemption of Israel was near (1:13-17) and Zacharias would be part of it, for his son would be the forerunner of the Redeemer Himself.

The child's name will be John (meaning Yahweh has been gracious), but the significance is not as much in the name itself as the fact that God is the one who determined what his name would be (normally, the father chose the name). "God naming the child shows that the child is important to His work (Gen. 16:11; 1 Ki. 13:2; Isa. 7:14)" (Bock, 83).

1:14 "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.

1:15 "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.

1:16 "And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.

1:17 "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."

Zacharias would feel great joy at the birth of the boy and the destiny he would fulfill, but his joy would be shared by others. This would not be an ordinary child but one who would prepare people for Messiah.

Zechariah's child would be great before the Lord. He would abstain from drinking all wine or alcoholic beverages (suggesting the consecration of one who took a Nazarite vow; i.e. a vow in which certain practices were observed to demonstrate total consecration to God).

He would also be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (something that is not said of any other person in the NT). The filling of the Spirit from his mother's womb prepares the reader for the child leaping in Elizabeth's womb when she hears Mary's greeting (1:44). His role as a herald for Messiah will begin before birth.

Because John the Baptist would turn many Israelites to the Lord (cf. Matt. 3:2) he is likened to Elijah (Mal. 3:1; 4:5ff)¹ whose primary goal was to turn erring people back to God. Elijah was also expected to appear before the coming of Messiah (Mal. 4:5). (Note carefully that Luke is not saying that John was a reincarnated Elijah, but that he came in the spirit and power of Elijah.)

He would also turn the hearts of fathers to their children. This may mean that he would restore broken families. In Malachi 4:5-6, where this allusion is thought to originate, it says that fathers and sons will be reunited and neighbors will be reconciled. This probably means that they would all repent, be converted, and seek God together (Marshall, 60); however, there are also a number of different and equally valid interpretations (Morris, 77-78).

1:18 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."

Zechariah's response to such wonderful news is astonishingly disappointing. His question, "How will I know that this is so?" is identical to that of Abraham who lived centuries before him (Gen. 15:8; also cf. Mary in Lk. 1:34, 45). Mary asked a similar question ("How can this be, since I am a virgin?" - Luke 1:34). But the spirit in which Zacharias asked was different than the two of them. Abraham and Mary were asking about *the way* that God would work. Zacharias was asking *for proof* that this would come to pass since he and his wife are too old to have babies; he wanted some kind of confirmation. Though he had been praying all these years for a child, his response shows that he didn't really believe it would happen. Garland points out that Zechariah's name means "God remembers," but he doesn't remember what God had done with Abraham and Sarah in giving them a son at a late age (Garland, 68).

The angel's reply in the verses that follow forms the confirmation Zacharias wanted, but not in a way that Zacharias had hoped.

1:19 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.

1:20 "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."

The angel identifies himself as Gabriel, meaning "man of God," and his position in the presence of God reveals his dignity and authority. He was sent by God to bring good news to Zechariah, but Zechariah's rejection of his message would have serious consequences. If Zacharias wanted a sign, he would get one. He would be unable to speak until the promise was fulfilled. This consequence accomplishes two things; it shows that unbelief cannot be tolerated, but also conceals the wonder of what is happening until it is time to be revealed. The birth of a son will also show that God cannot be stopped by man's unbelief.

1:21 The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple.

1:22 But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them; and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he kept making signs to them, and remained mute.

1:23 When the days of his priestly service were ended, he went back home.

The scene abruptly switches back to the worshippers outside. The priest normally offered the incense quickly, left the holy place, and then joined the other priests outside for the benediction (Num. 6:24-26). However, when Zacharias was delayed the people began to worry. Coming close to the Holy of Holies brought with it a certain danger. When he did finally come out, he could not speak, so the people assumed that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary; in reality, he was struck dumb for unbelief. The people will be left in the dark until the child comes and Zechariah's tongue is loosed.

As with Mary, the announcement of the birth came before the conception. Zacharias evidently remained at the temple and served until his term of duty was complete and then went home (Lk 1:23).

1:24 After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying,

1:25 "This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men."

In due time, Elizabeth conceived proving that what Gabriel had said was true. It isn't clear why Elizabeth hid herself for five months, but when she appeared there was no question that she was pregnant.

Childlessness was viewed as a curse from God (Gen. 16:4; 30:1; I Sam. 1:6, etc.), and Elizabeth no doubt had borne the reproach of many who did not understand her devotion to God. In the OT Rachel lamented, "Give me children, or else I die" (Gen. 30:1). Therefore, Elizabeth interprets her pregnancy as a gracious act of God, for her reproach would now forever be removed. Her son, however, will have much greater significance than this in the plan of God.

NOTE 1: Prophecies of the messenger who would precede the coming of the Lord

Malachi 3:1 **"Behold, I [God] send My messenger [John the Baptist] and he [John the Baptist] will prepare the way before Me [God in Christ]. And the Lord [God] whom you seek will suddenly come [in Christ] to His [God's] temple; and the messenger of the covenant [Christ] in whom you delight, behold, He [Christ] is coming, says the LORD of hosts [God]."**

As MacLaren in his commentary on this passage says, "Emphatically and broadly it is declared that Jehovah Himself 'shall suddenly come to His temple'; and then the prophecy immediately passes on to speak of the coming of 'the Messenger of the covenant' . . . A mysterious relationship of oneness and yet distinctness is here shadowed, of which the solution is only found in the Christian truth that the Word, which was God, and was in the beginning with God, became flesh, and that in Him Jehovah . . . tabernacled among men."

God the speaker makes "the Lord," the "messenger of the covenant," one with Himself. Notice the parallelism:

And	the Lord (God)	whom you seek	will suddenly	come to His [God's] temple;
and	the messenger of the covenant (Christ)	in whom you delight,	behold, He is	coming,

Malachi is referring to Isaiah 40:3: "A voice is calling, 'Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.'"

This is then applied to John the Baptist in Mark 1:2-5: 2 "As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, 3 the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" 4 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins."

Repentance was to be the preparation for the kingdom of Christ.

Malachi 4: 5 "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. 6 "And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse."

Luke 1:17: "It is he (John the Baptist) 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."

Luke 1:76: "And you (John the Baptist), child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways"