



Luke

Lesson 1: Born of a Virgin

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).

Doctrinal focus: God sends John the Baptist to prepare the way for the coming of God’s own Son and Christ, Jesus.

Read Luke 1:1-80.

The Gospel According to Luke is one of four gospels in the Bible recounting the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Each gospel presents the story of Jesus from a somewhat different perspective with a somewhat different purpose. While they all agree, they highlight different aspects of the rich story of Jesus.

Luke was a Gentile and physician (Colossians 4:14) who seems to have known Mary the mother of Jesus well and to have worked closely with the apostle Paul (2 Timothy 4:11). He wrote this gospel (probably around 65 A.D.) and the Acts of the Apostles. His gospel is the longest of the four gospels in the New Testament.

The beginning of Luke’s gospel in Greek is one long sentence (Luke 1:1-4) in elegant, formal Greek that sets out carefully Luke’s purpose in writing. He writes to someone called Theophilus (“friend of God”) who is presumably a Gentile and a believer in Jesus. He states that he writes to increase the confidence and certainty of Theophilus in all that he has been taught. Luke notes that many have written about the story of Jesus, but he is determined, because of his familiarity with the truth, to write an “orderly account” of what he knows. In particular he says he will show what had been accomplished or fulfilled. Although Luke does not mention Jesus explicitly in this opening sentence, his gospel, which might well be called the “Gospel of Fulfillment,” shows again and again

that Jesus not only fulfilled what was promised in the Old Testament, but also fulfilled what was spoken by the angels, by John the Baptist, and by Jesus himself in the New Testament.

Luke’s “orderly account” begins with a very orderly parallel account of the coming of John and of Jesus. As we proceed to look at this carefully crafted story, we will see how Luke has ordered the story and how that order helps us to see more deeply into the meaning of the story he tells.

The first section of Luke’s story is about the appearance of an angel to the priest Zechariah, promising that he would have a son, John. This first episode presents an initially quite positive picture of religion in Israel. Zechariah the priest and his wife Elizabeth are faithful servants of the Lord (Luke 1:6), but have no children. Then Zechariah is chosen to offer incense in the temple. (In those days there were so many priests that this may have been Zechariah’s only opportunity to minister in the Holy Place.)

The angel promises Zechariah a son who will be great in the service of the Lord and prepare Israel for what is coming. Zechariah wonders how such a thing could happen. In the face of this unbelief, the angel tells Zechariah that he will not be able to speak (asking other unbelieving questions) until the angel’s words come true. The word of the angel is fulfilled: Zechariah cannot speak and Elizabeth becomes pregnant.

Luke proceeds in his orderly account from the announcement of the birth of John to the announcement of the birth of Jesus. As the angel had appeared to Zechariah, so now he appears to Mary, promising that she will bear a son who will be great as the Son of God and the son of David.

Mary asks how she as a virgin will be able to have a child. At first glance she seems to question the angel in a way similar to Zechariah's question. But the angel sees that her question does not arise out of unbelief and so tells her that this will happen through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Mary shows her faith in accepting the Word of the Lord that has come to her through the angel. She declares that she submits to the Lord as his servant.

Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth blesses Mary as the woman most favored by God because of the child she is carrying. Elizabeth recognizes that this child is her Lord and tells Mary that the child that Elizabeth is carrying has been filled with joy in the presence of Jesus. She further blesses Mary because of Mary's faith that God would keep his promise. Faith is assurance that God will fulfill what he has spoken.

Mary responds with a beautiful poem of praise and thanks to God. She attributes all that she has to

God: he is her savior, the one who has done great things for her, the holy one, the merciful one, the strong one who protects his own and casts down their enemies. That she praises God as her savior is telling in light of the belief that emerged later in the Catholic Church that Mary, like Christ, was born sinless. In fact, she praises God, not only for what he has done for her, but sees in his blessings to her God's care for all his covenant people. What God is doing for Mary is a fulfillment of his promise to Abraham and Israel that he will be merciful.

In the midst of great joy Elizabeth gives birth to a son. She and Zechariah insist that the child be named John, which surprises their friends because it is not a family name. Zechariah receives again his power of speech, just as the angel had said, and praises the Lord. All who heard of it are amazed.

Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and speaks the Word of the Lord in a poem very much like many of the psalms of the Old Testament. Zechariah recognizes that the purpose of John will be to point to the Christ, so his poem begins and ends with reflections on Christ (vs. 68-69 and 78-79). At the center of the poem is the purpose of Christ's redemption (vs. 74b-75). Bracketing this center section is a section on the prophets who pointed to Christ (vs. 70-74a) and a section on John as a prophet (vs. 76-77).

Recommended Commentary

Luke by Phillip Ryken (Reformed Expository Commentary)



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Questions for Discussion

Read Luke 1:1-80.

1. How will Luke's Gospel increase Theophilus' confidence and certainty?
2. Why does Luke stress the theme of fulfillment in his gospel?
3. Does Luke's Gospel seem more orderly than the other gospels? In what ways?
4. Explain the integrity of Zechariah and Elizabeth as presented in Luke 1:6.
5. Why do angels in the New Testament when they appear, almost always begin to speak with the words: "Fear not?"
6. What was the greatness of John promised by the angel (Luke 1:14-17)?
7. Explain how Mary's child will be great (Luke 1:31-33, 35) and compare his greatness with John's greatness.
8. Explain the importance of the angel's statement in Luke 1:37.

9. How does the faith of Mary show us the connection between faith and the Word of God?

10. What do we learn about Mary and Jesus from Elizabeth?

11. What does it mean for Mary to magnify the Lord? In what ways does Mary magnify the Lord in her poem?

12. How is the theme of fulfillment important in this section of Luke?

13. What do we learn about Jesus from Zechariah's poem?

14. What do we learn about our salvation from Zechariah's poem?

15. What do we learn about the prophets from Zechariah's poem?