

## Luke Introduction, and Chapter 1 Part 1- John Karmelich

1. God made it obvious to me awhile back that He wants me to teach the one gospel I haven't done yet, the Gospel of Luke. Therefore, welcome to my introduction to this Gospel and I'll even take on part of Chapter 1, which is a long 80-verse chapter. In effect, this is the end of a project I took on about ten years ago when I taught Acts verse by verse, which was written by the same author.
2. Let me assume for a moment that you, the reader, are already pretty familiar with the accounts given in the four Gospel stories. Why should we use our time to study Luke just because this is the one gospel you haven't taught yet? The most important answer I can give, is that God called each one of us who are trusting in Jesus as both Lord (in charge of our lives) and our Savior (the one who paid the full price for our sins) to always strive to draw closer to Him and be willing to share our faith with others. In other words, the better we know Jesus, the easier it is to talk about Him to others. Do I know yet how many lessons this will take? No idea. Am I positive I get how God wants to draw us closer to Him through these studies? Again no idea. I just know to learn about Jesus should be a goal all believers have and that is what is inspiring me to take on the one Gospel I've yet to teach up to this moment.
3. Whenever I start a new project, I like to give a few highlights of the who, what, when and how of a particular book. Let's start with who: There is almost no scholastic debate about Luke, and he's been accepted as the author almost since the beginning. Some of the earliest writings that exist to this day mention Luke as the author. What one gathers as one studies this book is how humble a man the author was. There are almost no references to himself in the book. His name isn't listed anywhere in either the Gospel of Luke or Acts. Paul makes references to Luke a few times in his letters and that is essentially all we know about him. The only self-reference to Luke is a handful of times in the book of Acts when the text uses the word "we" referring to his traveling with Paul.
  - a) Most likely Luke was a convert to Christianity while he was living in Antioch. That's the home of the first non-Jewish Christian church. The first "we" was in Acts 16:11 when Paul takes his second of three missionary journeys and apparently Luke was part of that team.
  - b) Colossians 4:14 mentions Luke by Paul as the beloved physician. The idea of doctors who give of their time to do missionary work is usually accredited to Luke as he worked in the background to help Paul on his missionary work. We don't know much about what Luke did on those missionary journeys but considering how often Paul was in prison and was physically beaten for the crime of being a missionary, I'm sure Luke suffered a similar fate and he probably helped with the wounds afflicted on the other missionaries.
  - c) My point here is that Luke is the kind of person who likes to work in the background without making a lot of fuss about who he is or what he does. Without Paul himself giving us a few tidbits about Luke we wouldn't know much about him.
4. This leads me back to the Gospel of Luke. In the first few verses, it is written to someone named Theophilus just as the Book of Acts was written to the same person. The name Theophilus means "Lover of God". Some argue that it was written to all Christians and that Theophilus was a code name for believers as it was written during a time of church persecution. However, Verse 3 says it was written to "most excellent Theophilus" so I believe it was an actual person and some sort of high official at that. Whoever Theophilus was, Luke gives us the most detailed account we have of Jesus, beginning with the events that lead up to his birth and ending with the events soon after the resurrection. Luke also wrote the bible book Acts or sometimes called "Acts of the Apostles". That book describes the birth of the Christian church and ends with Paul being in prison in Rome waiting for his trial to occur. Since the book ended before Paul was killed, it is most likely that it was written before his death. Most likely that's when both books were first put together from all of Luke's writings and studies. This was around AD 60, give or take a year or two. With that said, let me talk a little more about dates and explain how Luke gathered the data he gathered.

- a) It is important to remember at this point that Luke was not one of the 12 disciples. He did not come on the scene himself until Paul's Second missionary journey, which took place in the early "50's" of that century. So how did Luke find out so many details about the early life of Jesus and what He accomplished? By interviewing eyewitnesses to the events that are described in this book. Luke most likely interviewed Mary to learn the events of the early chapters. He probably had access to Mark and Matthew's Gospels that were already in circulation at that time. Luke probably interviewed whatever apostles were around. I state all that, because there are many of Jesus' miracles and stories that are only described in Luke's gospel. He must have interviewed eyewitnesses to those events.
  - b) Let me now come back to the most likely date when the book was written, around AD 60. Among the things that Jesus predicted was the destruction of the Temple. That occurred in 70 AD according to Roman records, yet there is no mention of that actual destruction in Luke's Gospel or any of the gospels for that matter. You would think if Jesus' words were fulfilled that literally, it would have been mentioned in those stories. That's why scholars are pretty certain about the dates that both Luke and Acts were put together.
5. Let me quickly talk about where this book takes place. To state the obvious, Luke's Gospel takes place in Israel as that is where Jesus spent all of his time. The Book of Acts talks a lot about the city of Antioch (in Syria today) where Paul first got converted. Acts follows Paul along with a lot of detail on his missionary journeys. In Acts 23-24, Paul was in prison in Caesarea, a city in Israel after being arrested in Jerusalem. Most scholars speculate during that two-year imprisonment is when Luke most likely went to go interview people so that he could write this two-volume book.
6. Before I get into the all-important "why" subject, let me talk a little about the original language in which this book was written: Greek. Luke's writings are considered the best Greek of the entire New Testament. In Israel at that time the common spoken language was Aramaic. Hebrew was the language of bible scholars. Greek was the common language of the Roman Empire as much of that world was conquered by the Greeks centuries earlier. We don't know if Greek was Luke's native language, but he appeared to understand it better than the other bible writers. Greek also has two common dialects, meaning there was a formal Greek language for the highly educated and a common Greek dialect that most people spoke. While the book introduction is the formal Greek style, the rest of this book is written in the common dialect so anyone who spoke Greek could understand what it says and others can translate it easier into other languages.
7. OK, time for my favorite question: Why was it written? If the Gospels of Matthew and Mark in circulation already, why did Luke want to put together another account? Oh, the Gospel of John is said to have come much later and was probably dated around 90AD as the disciple John lived the longest of all the disciples. For starters, Luke gives us far more details about the life of Jesus than any of the other Gospel writers. Luke's Gospel stresses Jesus' humanity far more than any of the other three Gospels. While Matthew the disciple's gospel focuses upon Jesus as the promised Messiah to the Jewish people and Mark's Gospel was primarily written to a Roman reader, Luke inspired by the Holy Spirit wrote an account of the life of Jesus and the early church emphasizing Jesus' humanity. Yes there is overlap in the Gospel accounts as they share many common stories. Still, each Gospel is unique. Think of the four gospels as four witnesses describing a same event. What appear to be contradictions, which is common for different witnesses describing something turns out to be different views of the same or similar events.
- a) I should share that there was a famous 19th Century archeologist named William Ramsey. He studied the historical evidence of Luke's writings initially to disprove it. He became convinced that every detail in Acts and Paul's letters was accurate. One can read details of his life and work on the "wiki" page for William Mitchell Ramsey.
  - b) Meanwhile, back to the question of why did Luke write this? Short version is to convince the reader (you and me) that what took place about Jesus was accurate. If we already do believe it is accurate, then think of studying this account to draw us closer to Jesus as we all strive to be better witnesses for Him as we dedicate some of our time for God's glory.

8. All of that leads me to the title of this lesson: "How God prepared people for the birth of Jesus". You would think that if God Himself were to come into the world, the sky all around the world would be filled with angels blowing horns or some sort of similar grand scale production. What we do get is God coming in human form in a very humble way being witnessed effectively by a bunch of nobodies. The only reason the world finds out about these "nobodies" is because Luke's Gospel (as well as the other three) interviewed or were eyewitnesses to the actual events.
- a) So why did God use these unknown people to bring Jesus into the world? Think in terms of provable evidence. All the events about the birth of Jesus were predicted somewhere in the Old Testament that has been already written, and in circulation for centuries. The Old Testament has been studied and memorized by scholars, and in effect God was silent for about a 400-year period where no recorded prophets or angelic visits took place. Then God used and preserved during periods of persecution the writings of the Gospel writers. There is far more evidence for the existence and accuracy of the Gospel manuscripts than any and all other documents we have about ancient history. Bottom line: God used this method as it was the best available using the technology of that time to prove that Jesus did come at that time and the Gospel accounts are accurate. For a good background on the topic of New Testament manuscripts, goggle Dr. Dan Wallace or watch his you-tube videos on those New Testament manuscripts. OK, enough of that, let's start Chapter 1.
9. Verse 1: Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, <sup>2</sup> just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.
- a) In the original Greek, Verses 1-4 are all one sentence. This is the only part of the Gospel written in "formal" Greek. It was a common style among ancient writers to begin a story by stating the purpose of a story in the introduction.
  - b) With that said, consider the word translated "Many" to start the Gospel. Does that mean at one time there were other gospel accounts besides Matthew and Mark? Probably, but they were not inspired by the Spirit of God and got lost in time. What about books that were supposedly written like "The Gospel of Thomas"? The short version is that scholars have studied all of those other books we still have in circulation to this day and those who have studied those other books have come to the conclusion that they are forgeries or fake accounts of what was accurate. In other words the facts in those other books don't line up with historical evidence of what we know about life in Israel at that time. To put it simply Luke's account along with the other Gospels stand the test of archeological discoveries in ancient Israel. That's why Jewish scholars don't doubt the existence of Jesus, they simply don't believe He was a God, a subject I'll discuss a lot as we go through this book.
  - c) Meanwhile, coming back to the text, Luke's point is that there were probably other people who set out to write an account of the life of Jesus and even the growth of the early church and most of that writing never survived the test of time. The one exception that many of you might have heard of is "Josephus" a pro-Roman Jewish historian who wrote around this time and even had a brief mention about Jesus in his writing. Josephus focus was on the history and wars Israel fought in, so writing about Jesus was not his focus or purpose.
  - d) Speaking of coming back to Luke, let me try again. Luke is describing in Verse 1 others who have described the events of Jesus life. Some scholars argue Luke is also referring to Old Testament writings that predict the life of Jesus, but I won't go there at this time.
    - i) However, Luke's other point is in effect that he himself was not an eye witness to the life of Jesus, but Luke set out to interview many who were eyewitnesses and compile what Luke learned in this book from those accounts. Therefore what we are reading is an accurate account of the life of Jesus based on Luke's interviews with people who were there.

- e) This leads me to the person to whom this book is written to: Theophilus. Again his name means "lover of God". We have no historical record about this person or even if he ever did read Luke's writings. That's why some scholars doubt he was a real person. My view is that Theophilus was some sort of Roman official who wanted to know more about Jesus so Luke took the trouble to write a historical account.
    - i) It's amazing to consider the millions of people who were named Luke throughout history based on the fact one man took the trouble to write this book. It shows the long-term benefits of taking the trouble to dedicate part of one's life to Jesus.
  - f) Before I move on, I'm dying to share a really bad joke as I heard from Jon Curson to help us remember the name Theophilus. It goes, "I believe Doctor Luke helped the mother of Theophilus deliver the baby. Luke's response on first seeing the baby was, "That's "the awfulist" looking baby I've ever seen". (Say it out loud if you don't get it.) Yes it's a bad joke, but it will help you remember the name Theophilus. OK, onto Verse 5.
10. Verse 5: In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. <sup>7</sup> But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.
- a) The first thing I need to say about these verses is to give a brief history of "Herod". What can be confusing as one studies the New Testament, is that there is more than one Herod. The Herod being described here is the first one of a short dynasty of kings who ruled over much of Israel as well as the surrounding area. He was no Jewish, but an Edomite. The Romans let him be the leader over this area in exchange for helping the Romans conquer this area and have peace with the surrounding communities. Scholars date the life of this Herod as being from 73BC to 4BC.
    - i) That leads me to a quick discussion about when Jesus was born. To make it short, I don't believe Jesus was born on Christmas in the year 0. Most likely it was a few years before that. The reason Christmas was picked as the day of Jesus birth is in the early Roman Empire there was a pagan holiday around that time of the year. In order to get the masses to accept Christianity in the 4th Century AD, a Roman Emperor who was Christian decided to make that date, the date of Jesus birth so that this pagan festival would become associated with Jesus birth. In fact to prove Jesus was not actually born on Christmas, remember that the Romans ordered that a census take place. Parts of the Roman world couldn't be traveled in the middle of winter, so they would never order a census at that time of the year.
    - ii) OK, now that you know Herod died before the year "0" (as if there was a year 0), and Jesus wasn't actually born on Christmas, let me talk about the rest of the text.
  - b) The rest of the text focuses on the lives of a couple named Zechariah and his wife named Elizabeth. The first thing we read about Zechariah was that he was "a" priest. We get the impression that he was nothing special. He wasn't the head priest or this group's leader. He was just a man picked by God to be the father of John the Baptist. The positive things said about this man was that he was a God fearing priest who probably did his job well and did his best to serve God and seek Him all of his life.
    - i) It would probably help at this point to give a little historical background about the priests in Israel at this time. By best scholar estimates there were probably about 16,000 to 20,000 priests who were all descendants of the first High Priest. Any of those men could go to the Temple study their family records and prove that they were each descendants of the original priest (Moses' brother). As I stated earlier, the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD so those family records are now long gone.
    - ii) All of these priests were divided into 12 groups. Each group only served 2 weeks a year and on the major holidays. Then they went back to where they lived.

- iii) I give all of this background to understand that when Zechariah was picked to go in the Temple (coming up in the next few verses), it was probably the only time in his lifetime he would have that privilege. Think of it as winning the lottery as he had the privilege among all the priests in his group to do the honor coming up.
    - c) In the meantime, I need to come back to the last set of verses. Another key point stated in those verses is that Elizabeth was barren and that this couple was advanced in years. This probably means that they were now beyond the age of bearing children and I'm guessing that Elizabeth had already had "the change" where she could no longer get pregnant.
      - i) This section is a little personal to me, as my wife and I struggled for years in order to get pregnant. We eventually got two beautiful girls, but let me just say that I can relate to this couple as I understand what it's like to suffer barrenness. I want to mention, there is a wonderful international ministry called "Hannah's Ministry" to help women who are dealing with being barren.
      - ii) Understand in this culture to be barren is a sign that God hasn't looked favorably upon you. I can imagine how long and hard this couple prayed for children to a point where they finally said, "OK, it's not God's will for us to have children" and they had to accept that fact. Now stop and consider the fact that God picked this couple to bring John the Baptist into the world, as described in the next few verses.
11. Verse 8: Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, <sup>9</sup>he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup> And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.
- a) Meanwhile, its time to get back to our story. Remember how I said Zechariah was like a lottery winner? I was being literal. There were a large number of priests who's turn it was to be on duty at the temple in Jerusalem. There were lots of duties to be performed during that time. Among them was to take some incense into the Temple and offer it on an altar dedicated to prayer. This was considered one of the highest duties that a priest could perform. The text says that Zechariah's name was chosen "by lot" meaning that he was the lottery winner to go perform this specific duty.
  - b) Let me share here a comment from the official Jewish commentary called the "Talmud". It is in effect that when a priest goes in the temple, they shouldn't waste time. They should place the incense on the altar say a prayer and leave. The fear is they might be tempted to go into the most sacred area that only the High Priest could enter once a year. Bottom line was do your duty, and get out. With that information known to this group of rabbi's, that is when Zechariah did his duty of going into the temple, while the rest of the priests got together to pray for Zechariah to do his duty correctly. With that said, let's read on.
12. Verse 11: Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. <sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. <sup>14</sup> He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. <sup>16</sup> Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."
- a) So here was this "everyday" priest entering the temple and there was an angel standing by the altar where Zechariah had to work. This angel knew Zechariah by name and he knew that Zechariah had a wife named Elizabeth and they had no children. The angel then told Zechariah that he'd have a baby and that the baby's name would be John. The angel went on to describe what John would be like: He'd have God's spirit upon him from birth, he'd be like the Old Testament prophet Elijah and help people get ready for the Messiah.

- b) The end of verse 12 says that Zechariah was gripped with fear. That's normal considering how rare it was to see an angel let alone have this angel describe your life to you.
  - c) Personally, if that were me, I would be too in shock to say anything. I would know this is an angel, first of all, by the fact that no one could enter the temple except by the one door and no one came in that door. Even if the angel's appearance didn't convince him, the fact that the angel knew Zechariah by name and the fact he had no children should be enough evidence to convince him this was an angel of God. At the least, I might say how grateful I was for this honor or ask the angel why he picked me?
  - d) One has to remember that the greatest honor an Israelite could have other than being the Messiah Himself would to be the person who gets to introduce the Messiah to the world. That is what this angel is telling Zechariah that his son would do. That is also a privilege that we Christians get to share, introducing God's Messiah (eternal king) to other people.
  - e) The verses go on to say that John was to not drink wine or strong drink all of his life. As a priest Zechariah would recognize this as a "Nazarite Vow". To put it simply, this is a vow as described in Numbers 6:1-21 when a non-priest wants to dedicate part of their life for a purpose of serving God they would cut their hair and avoid alcohol during that time. Here Zechariah learns that his soon to be son was to have that vow his entire life. This is told to Zechariah so he would know how to properly raise his son to be.
  - f) It's interesting to consider all of this from the perspective of living in Israel at that time. In effect there was no biblically recorded visits of angels or prophets for many centuries. All of a sudden this angel shows up and tells this "average" priest that he will have the special privilege of giving birth to a son in his old age. This son would have the unique privilege of leading people to Jesus and pointing the way to the Messiah. Notice the angel didn't mention the part how John would be killed by the order of one of Herod's sons later. The message was just of good news and that's the focus here.
  - g) Oh, a little on the name John: The word means "God is gracious". The name Jesus means, "God is salvation". The point is the name John is associated with the grace of God being at this moment poured out on John's father as he was chosen for pointing to the Messiah as He came into the world.
  - h) OK, why should I care about all of these details? The point is just as God was gracious to John, so God is gracious to you and me as we get the privilege also of being able to share the good news of salvation without having to prove our worth to God to others. The vast majority of people in this world truly believe the way to heaven is by having their good deeds outweigh their bad ones. We get the privilege of teaching them otherwise just as John the Baptist gets that privilege coming up later in this book. In the meantime, it's time to read Zechariah's reaction to all of this:
13. Verse 18: Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."
- a) To put it simply, Zechariah was a doubter. He could have said, "why me, or thank you for giving me this privilege". Instead he asks for more signs of proof. This reminds me a little of when Jesus complained to the crowds who saw his miracles and demanded more proof that He was the Promised Messiah. (See John 4:48 as an example.) My point is to receive a miracle is one thing. To demand more miracles is saying to God, the proof You have given us is not enough."
  - b) Think about it this way: Why can't we say to God, "if you are truly God, make Yourself visible to me right here and right now"? The answer is He gives us His word as proof and that's all we need. That's why Jesus said that even if one rises from the dead people won't be convinced (Luke 16:31). If they don't believe what was written in the bible, they won't be convinced by miracles. (My paraphrase of that verse.)
  - c) In the meantime, it's time for the angel to chew Zechariah out for the fact that an angel is right in front of him describing his life and he refuses to believe what says is true.

14. Verse 19: The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. <sup>20</sup> And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."
- a) Time for another of my loose translations: "Zechariah, you idiot! Who do you think you are talking to you anyway? How do you think I know about your life if I wasn't an angel sent by God? Because you doubted me and demanded more miracles, you will not be able to speak until around the time the baby comes around."
  - b) If you study your bible, there are only two angels mentioned by name. One is Gabriel who is mentioned here and in the book of Daniel. Apparently he is a top angel and his job is usually to deliver good news to people. The other one mentioned by name in the bible is Michael, whose job it is to fight on behalf of the nation of Israel. The bible says that there are multitudes of angels in Matthew 26:53 and elsewhere. Apparently Gabriel and Michael are two of the top angels as they have ranks the same way there are military ranks. By the way, I also believe demonic angels are in military ranks as well, but that's another topic for another day.
  - c) At this point I want to focus on the phrase "good news". The word "gospel" means good news. That term is pretty unique to Luke's gospel and the word has become a common term in our language to describe all four gospels. So why is it called good news anyway? It is the realization that we don't have to please God based on doing good deeds. We are not saved by our good deeds outweighing our bad deeds. We don't have to go knock on doors witnessing to others to prove our worth to God. We don't have to pray, say hours a day to prove our worth to Him. Yes we should do good works, but not to earn favor with God, but strictly out of gratitude for what God has done for us not in any way or form to earn points with Him. That's the good news we are called to spread to others.
  - d) Meanwhile, back to the story. Consider why the angel made John unable to speak until it was time for John the Baptist to be born. After all Zechariah still had to convince his wife to try to have a child. Yes this silence shows the consequences of doubting what it is God wants us to accomplish. If you think about it, the angel could have put on some sort of big show there in the temple to convince Zechariah. The silence is a good way of saying, you don't believe the good news, then you won't be able to talk about it for a good while. In a way it is similar to Paul not accepting when Jesus first talked to Paul, so Jesus blinded him for a while so Paul had the time to think about and focus upon that vision.
15. Verse 21: Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. <sup>22</sup> When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.
- a) If you recall, I said it was part of the official Jewish commentary on God's law that's called the Talmud, states that when one had to perform one's duty in the temple, one does what one is called to do, and then get out. The temptation was to say, peak in the section called the "Holy of Holies" of that temple where only the High Priest could enter once a year. So here was Zechariah in there for a long time and the other priests were tired of waiting for him to come out and wondering if he did something wrong or something deadly.
  - b) I picture Zechariah running out of the temple now, flapping his arms, trying to make any type of arm motion to explain what he had just saw. Remember that he didn't have any knowledge of sign language. I can just see his excitement as he was trying to explain that he saw an angel who knew all about his life and that he was going to be the father of the one that leads the Messiah into the world. I also picture a large group of priests standing there wondering, why isn't this guy talking? Why does he want to play charades with us right now? I seriously doubt any of the priests had a writing instrument handy, so I can just picture in a humors way, Zechariah jumping up and down, flapping his arms trying to describe the events that just occurred in the temple.

16. Verse 23: When his time of service was completed, he returned home.<sup>24</sup> After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.<sup>25</sup> "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."
- a) Speaking of humor, I don't think life got any easier for Zechariah for the next few days. He was not allowed to go home there on the spot. It's as if the other priests had to explain to him that whether you can speak or not, you are still on duty as a priest, there's still food and housing supplied for you while you're on duty, so finish being a priest. A big part of the priests' duty was to slaughter animals and prepare them for sacrifice. I just picture an excited Zechariah unable to speak, being reminded what to do when on duty for the rest of the time he had to spend there.
  - b) Speaking more of humor, now picture poor Zechariah going home. His wife asked how was the week. All he could do is jump up and down and try to communicate with her what did happen. Girls, picture your husbands coming back from a business trip and he is unable to speak. Your first thought is he has laryngitis. Then you may realize after a few days that he was struck silent after he writes down what has happened. Then you realize you have an attentive husband who must listen to you without interrupting.
    - i) If you notice the text says that for the first five months that Elizabeth was pregnant she didn't leave the house. Why? For starters she could talk to her husband with no interruptions. I suspect she enjoyed it at first, and then had to work with him so he could even go about whatever his duty was as a priest back home. It became a new challenge in their marriage that they had to work out.
    - ii) I also thought about this from another perspective. Imagine Elizabeth probably in her fifties getting pregnant. All of her friends are probably grandmothers by now or at least have grown children. Now she has to be pregnant and probably have to go hang around with girls half her age to deal with it. She would need help from her husband to adjust to having a child at that age. She was probably also dealing with the thought that her child would lead the promised Messiah into the world and what that would mean for both her and her child.
    - iii) Remember the angel told Zechariah that the child was to have a "Nazarite Vow" from his birth. The mom had to wonder, how do I explain that to my son? How do I raise my child to not be like other children and focus only on God? All those questions and dealing with a deaf husband is probably why she probably never left the house the first five months of the pregnancy.
  - c) OK, we sort of know all of this ancient history, but never really thought about the details. How does any of this affect us? For starters, consider the cost to us if we believe God is calling us to do something and we don't believe Him. Even better, how do we know if and when God is calling us to a project? The answer is simply do what one enjoys doing and see if God is blessing any project you might be involved with for His glory. Usually it is in hindsight where we realize what it is He is calling us to do after we start it. The point is to believe God's word, do something about it and also realize that whatever limitations we have in life (like Zechariah's quietness), God is quite aware of it, and He'll work with us on whatever level we are it, if we are willing to use our time for His glory.
  - d) In the meantime, it's now time for this same angel to go check in with Mary.
17. Verse 26: In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,<sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.<sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."
- a) Notice the phrase "sixth month". It refers to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. I'd like you to consider how did Luke know all of this if he wasn't there in those days? Most likely Zechariah and Elizabeth had past away by the time Luke wrote all of this.

- i) What I'm getting at is I believe Luke interviewed Mary. She probably heard the story first hand from Zechariah and Elizabeth about what happened in the temple and how Elizabeth miraculously got pregnant. That's how it was told to Luke and how all of these details were told to us.
- b) Meanwhile back to one of the most famous bible stories: an angel appearing to Mary.
  - i) Most scholars estimate that Mary was probably 14 or 15 at this point. Remember that parents arranged marriages for their children. As a father of two girls, I admit I like that concept. All Mary knew at this point is that she was engaged, but yet to have any sexual relations yet.
  - ii) So you know, the reason they got married so young, was that this was a culture based on agriculture. Therefore, having a large family was important so there were more people to help on the farm. Therefore, the earlier one got pregnant in theory the more children one can have.
- c) Let me pause at this moment and comment on the fact that both Mary and Joseph were both descendants of King David. If you study Matthew's gospel, he gives the genealogy of Joseph in Matthew Chapter 1 to show how he is a direct descendant of King David. When we get to Chapter 3 of Luke, we'll read how Mary is also a descendant of King David. The difference is Mary is not a descendant of all the other kings of David. Mary came from a brother of King Solomon. The point here is that both Joseph and Mary were legally from the same tribe in Israel and both descendants of David.
  - i) Let me also share one of my favorite questions to ponder: How was Joseph the father of Jesus based on the virgin birth? The short version is "legal adoption". In the Jewish culture if one agrees to marry a pregnant woman, that baby legally is now the son of the pregnant woman. It's that way in the Roman culture too. That is why it was a big deal for Joseph to agree to marry her despite the shame caused by everyone knowing the baby was not his. In effect it's based on something in the book of Numbers 27 and 36 that teaches that a Jewish woman is to marry from the same tribe so that no one tribe's inheritance increases or decreases based on who one marries. (See Numbers 36:6 as an example of this principal.) In short, that's why Joseph was the legal father of Jesus even though he was not the actual father.
- d) With all that said, now let me focus on the angel speaking to Mary. The angel's greeting is translated, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."
  - i) I'm a big believer that many Roman Catholics raise up Mary too high in status. At the same time too many Protestants don't raise Mary up high enough. It's as if we Protestants are afraid of praising Mary due to the practice of many Catholics, so we don't give her the honor she deserves. I don't think of Mary as being anything special in the sense that Zechariah was just an "average priest" who God picked as the one for this task. This is the type of event in one's life that to one's dying day one remembers in detail what happened. That's how Luke knew all of this.
  - ii) As one who grew up Catholic, I remember praying to Mary for part of my life. It is very common for Catholics to do so. The text calls her "highly favored". That does not mean she has any more power to intercede on God's behalf than praying directly to God. My personal view on this is God so much desires a relationship with people that He simply puts up with that prayer knowing that it drives people to pray to Him and in effect draws people closer to Him.
  - iii) When the text says, "The Lord is with you", it refers to the fact she was chosen by God to be the mother of the baby. One has to understand that there is no greater honor that can be given to any Jewish woman than to be chosen to be the mother of the Messiah of the Jewish people.
  - iv) One can just imagine a teenage girl either in bed one night or doing housework now being told this greeting, let alone seeing an angel right in front of her.

18. Verse 29: Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."
- a) I picture Mary being pretty scared at this point. I'm sure her first reaction was to call her parents into the room so that she would have other witnesses to this event. The angel had to reassure her to calm down, and listen and not go running out of the room.
  - b) At this point, I'd like to compare and contrast Mary's reaction to how Zechariah reacted to the vision of the angel. Both of them wondered how this could be true. The difference is Mary wondered how it would be possible, while Zechariah asked for more signs. Let me explain it this way, it's ok to read one's bible and ponder, how is this possible or what is it God wants me to learn this passage. It's another thing to demand (key word) a sign from Him over and above what we do learn from reading the bible itself. That's why Zechariah lost his voice and Mary got her questions answered in these verses.
  - c) This text makes me wonder how much of a Jewish home school education did Mary have before this began. Most children are curious at some point about their family history. I'm willing to bet that Mary's parents explained to her at some point that they are descendants of King David and that one day a descendant of his would be a promised king who would rule over Israel forever and bring peace to the people. Remember that the Israelites lived under Roman rule and the Israelites wanted that to end. Therefore, while I doubt that she was an expert on Jewish history at that age, she did know enough about her family lineage that it is possible for her one day to give birth to this promised eternal king.
  - d) With that said, let me know focus on Verse 30. The angel told Mary "She has found favor with God." I'm sure Mary pondered what that meant. I suspect it simply means that God saw her as someone who was obedient to His laws and her parents and that she will be able to handle this difficult assignment. It strikes me as difficult to have to raise Jesus as a child, knowing what His destiny would be.
  - e) While thoughts like that probably didn't occur to her yet, she was probably more scared just by the realization she was alone with a powerful angel of God. I'm guessing that she just wanted the angel to finish his statements so she could share whatever he did say with her family.
  - f) All of that leads me to the last part of Verse 32 and all of Verse 33. In effect, we're reading here an unfulfilled promise to Mary. The promise of this verse is that Jesus would have the throne of his father David. David's throne is not in heaven, but in Jerusalem. The text also says he would rule over "the house of Jacob" which is a colorful way of saying Jesus would rule over Israel from Jerusalem. My question is when did that happen? To state the obvious, the answer is not yet. Therefore, in order for the angel's statement to be true, Jesus must return to earth. Therefore we are reading a promise of His Second Coming at this point even though Mary didn't realize all of this yet. I still picture Mary as a scared young teenager trying to take all of this in and contemplating how it will affect her life.
  - g) I'm positive that visit stuck in Mary's head all of her life. Those of us who have lived a good while usually can still recall vividly the details of important events in our early life in great detail when we get older. I state all of that as that is how I picture Mary telling all of this to Luke many years later when he interviewed her for the Gospel account.
  - h) So why did the angel order the name Jesus to be given? The answer is that name means "God is salvation". In Hebrew the name "Joshua" and "Jesus" (based on the Greek) are in effect the same name. The obvious point is that salvation for eternity will come based on one's belief in Jesus as both God (Lord over our lives) and one's Savior (His payment will cover all of our sins.) My point is just as this good news was given to Mary, our job is to spread that same good news to others.

- i) Finally let me talk about the phrase, "His kingdom will never end". It of course means that Jesus will not die. Yes it means He will rule over our lives not only here, but also forever in the next life. I sort of hold the view that one better get used to spending a lot of time worshipping God now, as we're going to do that a lot for eternity. How we actually do praise God is the topic of my next lesson as I finish Chapter 1. In the meantime, there is still about a half-dozen verses I want to cover in this lesson before I wrap it up.
19. Verse 34: "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"
- a) The simple point here is not that Mary doubted the angel. She just wanted to know how all of this will be possible since she is a virgin. Going back to Zechariah, I don't believe it is acceptable to ask God for more signs, but it is acceptable to ask for explanations. If one is ever stuck on what a bible verse or passage means, pray about it. It never fails to amaze me how God will answer our questions if it's our desire to learn more about Him. If we ever need proof if God is real, ponder a bible question that we may be really stuck on for a moment, and watch Him work over time to answer that question.
20. Verse 35: The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For nothing is impossible with God."
- a) There is a classical expression in Christianity that Jesus was "fully man and fully God". It just means that Jesus was not "part each", but fully of each category. In the same way that Adam and Eve were direct creations of God, so the "Seed of God" (think of a male sperm) was used to get Mary pregnant. Does that mean Jesus was capable of sinning? I suppose yes in the same sense that Adam and Eve were capable of sinning, but Jesus chose not to. It also means that Jesus was not born with the "sin disease" that you and I are born with because of what Adam and Eve did.
- i) To say it another way, why do we sin? Because it is in our own nature to sin. Did Jesus have that nature? Yes in the sense he could be tempted the same way we are tempted, but he didn't have the built in desire to sin that we are "stuck with".
- b) Personally I've never had a problem with what God can or cannot do. My view is simply that if God is God, He can do what He wants when He wants. Therefore if God Himself could impregnate Mary, I've never had a problem with that. If one accepts that idea that God exists and well, "God is God", then Verse 37 should be easily acceptable to us. If God can make it possible for an older woman like Elizabeth to have a child after she has gone through menopause, then God can make it possible for the virgin birth to occur.
- c) As a father of a young teenager, I can picture Mary at this age sort of "lighting up" at the mention of her older cousin Elizabeth. The point is Mary now has someone she can go talk to about this event who could relate to what the angel said to her. As to what Mary actually said to Elizabeth and the events of that encounter, I'll leave all of that for the next lesson. In the meantime, let me finish the last line about the angel's visit and wrap up the lesson for now.
21. Verse 38: "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.
- a) For a woman living in Israel back then, there is no greater honor than to be chosen to be the mother of the coming Messiah. Mary must have understood that concept. Notice she accepted the angel's word for it her about the miracle. I doubt she understood about God Himself impregnating her and probably thought at this time that after she and Joseph got married she would have this baby. The point is she accepted the angels visit and made a great statement here of "I am the Lord's servant". In effect, that's what God desires that we say to Him as well, "We are your servant and may Your will be done in our lives".
- b) One of the hardest aspects of our prayer life is to accept God's will. When tragedy strikes, we usually pray for it to go away. Difficulty is about accepting His will for His purposes.

- c) One of my favorite prayers when a tragedy strikes is simply, "May these lessons not be wasted". Of course we can and should pray for things to get better. However, once we accept God's will no matter what happens, it is much easier to deal with whatever it is we have to deal with at that moment.
  - d) With that said, we still have over a half chapter to go, and I'll save that for the next lesson.
22. Let me end by coming back to my lesson title, "How God prepared people for the birth of Jesus". We read of how God prepared a priest by the name of Zechariah for the birth of John the Baptist and how God prepared Mary for the birth of Jesus. A reason God wants us to know all of this is not just so that we could know about how the birth of Jesus came about. It is to understand how God prepares us for the for whatever plans he has for our own lives. None of us know what it is that God has planned for us today or in the future. We can't change our past, just learn from it.
- a) What God wants is for us to be like Mary and in effect say, "I am Your servant God, even though I don't know what that entails, I accept the idea that You are in charge of my life and I would like You to use it for Your glory. Guide my time and my resources so that I can make a difference for You in this world. I can't think of a better ending prayer than that, so consider that my closing prayer for this lesson. And hopefully I can get an Amen from you the reader as we pray for us to be like Mary and accept God's will for our lives. I'll end that prayer with my standard phrase, we ask this in Jesus name, Amen.