

Christmas Special 2012-003 and 004: John the Baptist

Psalms 66:18 If I perceive sin in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.

Psalms 32:5 I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah.

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to

*forgive us our sins, and to
cleanse us from all other
unrighteousness.*

*I Cor 11:31 But if we judge
ourselves rightly, we should
not be judged.*

Ephesians 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Rom. 11:6, "*But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.*"

Gal. 2:21, "I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly."

Gal. 3:24, "Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith."

1 Corinthians 3:11 For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.'

John 3:16, "For God so loved

the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

*"Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved"
Acts 16:31*

Why another Gospel?

Why do we have four Gospels?
Would the world be a worse place if there were no Gospel of Luke?
Some might feel that one biography of the Lord Jesus would be enough. By way of analogy, we see depth in creation around us because we have two eyes and a brain that puts the two images together. Thus we see in three dimensions! The Gospels reveal Jesus not from three, but four viewpoints. Each one gives us a slightly different perspective on the life of the Saviour. Together, these perspectives give us the fullest and most complete picture

of the Son of God.

The Author

A reader of Luke's Gospel will quite reasonably ask, 'Who was Luke and why did he write this?' Luke was not among the twelve disciples of the Lord. We know that he was a doctor. In Colossians 4:14, Paul called him 'the beloved physician'. He probably came to faith during one of Paul's missionary journeys. In the Acts of the Apostles (also written by Luke), we discover that the author seems to have lived near to Troas in Asia Minor (Acts 16).

Luke trusted in the Lord Jesus, and began to accompany Paul. In

the Acts of the Apostles, Luke enters his own narrative but then, quite suddenly (in Acts 16:10–17), the reader encounters the word ‘we’ in describing Paul’s travels, indicating that Luke had joined the apostle Paul.

Luke provides a very full picture of the life of Christ, setting out material from eyewitnesses and applying painstaking attention to detail (see 1:3). We know that, when writing the Acts of the Apostles, Luke took great care to get historical, political and geographical details right.

We can therefore be confident that the same scrupulous accuracy has been applied as Luke wrote his

Gospel. Let us learn to trust our Bibles!

Luke seems not only to have been a painstakingly accurate historian, but a faithful believer and loyal friend, as is evident from the writings of Paul. The apostle wrote his second letter to Timothy as he prepared to stand before Caesar, approaching the end of his life. Having spoken with a broken heart of so many brothers who deserted him when he most needed them, he writes, 'Only Luke is with me' (2 Tim. 4:11).

Introducing the Gospel of Luke

The Gospel of Luke gives us a large amount of material not found in

the other Gospels. Of the total 1,151 verses in this Gospel, 499 are found only here. Of these, 261 are the sayings of Jesus. If there were no Gospel of Luke, we would have none of the following:

Some parables found only in Luke

The Good Samaritan; The Rich Fool; The Barren Fig Tree; The Wedding Banquet; The Prodigal Son; The Dishonest Steward; The Rich Man and Lazarus; The Persistent Widow; The Pharisee and the Publican; The Ten Pounds (or 'minas')

Some accounts found only in Luke

Zacharias and Elizabeth (1:5-80);
The birth of John the Baptist

(1:57, 58); The shepherds of Bethlehem (2:8-20); The widow of Nain's son (7:11-17); The seventy sent out (10:1-12); Mary listening as Martha served (10:38-42); Ten lepers healed (17:11-19); Zacchaeus (19:1-10); The dying thief who believed (23:39-43)

THERE is an interval, as you know, of about four hundred years between the book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, and the Gospels of the New Testament. We speak of these sometimes as “the four hundred silent years” because in those years we have no record, so far as inspired history is concerned, of God’s speaking audibly to man, either directly Himself or through angelic ministration.

Of course, in the books sometimes called “Apocrypha” we do read of angels visiting men and prophets being raised up, but in the inspired Scriptures we have no record of anything of the kind during those four hundred years. They were years of waiting. The people of Israel had returned from captivity in Babylon about B.C. 536 to 445.

God had spoken to His prophet Daniel, saying that at the end of a certain limited period—483 years to be exact, 69 periods of seven years each—the Messiah was to come, and the people were waiting for His coming. They knew that the time had almost expired, and one can understand the expectancy with which the Jews would go up to Jerusalem year after year to keep the feasts of the Lord, hoping that the promise would be fulfilled.

But nothing happened until a never-to-be-forgotten day when a priest named Zacharias was ministering in the holy place in the temple at Jerusalem.

Luke 1:1–4

¹Since many have indeed taken in hand to set in order an account of the matters completely confirmed among us,²as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word delivered them to us,³it seemed good to me as well, having followed up all these matters exactly from the beginning, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilos,⁴that you might know the certainty of the words which you were taught.

The preface to the Gospel of St. Luke, with which we are at present concerned, with great clearness

relates how its compiler, having availed himself of all the written and oral apostolic traditions then current in the Church, had personally, with careful and continuous research, traced up these various traditions to their very source, and, having arranged his many facts, presented the whole continuous story to a man of high rank in the Christian congregations, one Theophilus, a noble Greek or Roman, who may be taken as an example of a large class of inquiring earnest Christians of the years 70–90 A.D.

Ver. 1.—**Forasmuch as many have taken in hand.** The Greek in which St. Luke's Gospel is written is generally pure and classical, but the

language of the little introduction (vers. 1–4) is especially studied and polished, and contrasts singularly with the Hebrew character of the story of the nativity, which immediately follows. St. Luke here, in this studied introduction, follows the example of many of the great classical writers, Latin as well as Greek. Thucydides, Herodotus, Livy, for instance, paid special attention to the opening sentences of their histories.

The many early efforts to produce a connected history of the life and work of the great Master Christ are not, as some have supposed, alluded to here with anything like *censure*, but are simply referred to as being *incomplete*, as written without order or arrangement. They most probably formed the basis of much of St. Luke's own Gospel. These primitive Gospels quickly disappeared from sight, as they evidently contained nothing more than what was embodied in the fuller and more systematic narratives of the "four."

Of those things which are most surely believed among us. There was evidently no questioning in the Church of the first days about the truth of the story of the teaching and the mighty works of Jesus of Nazareth. It was the incompleteness of these first evangelists, rather than their inaccuracy, which induced St. Luke to take in hand a new Gospel.

Ver. 2.—Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eye-witnesses, and ministers of the Word. The general accuracy of the recitals contained in those early Gospels is here conceded, as the source of these primitive writings was the tradition delivered by the eye-

witnesses of the acts of Jesus; among these eye-witnesses the apostles would, of course, hold the foremost place. The whole statement may be roughly paraphrased thus: “The narrative of the memorable events which have been accomplished in our midst many have undertaken to compose. These different narratives are in strict conformity with the apostles’ tradition, which men who were themselves eye-witnesses of the great events, and subsequently ministers of the Word, handed down to us.

Now, I have traced up all these traditions anew to their very sources, and propose rewriting them in consecutive order, that you, my lord Theophilus, may be fully convinced of the positive certainty of those great truths in which you have been instructed.” *Eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word*; witnesses of the events of the public ministry of Jesus, from the baptism to the Ascension. These men, in great numbers, after Pentecost, became ministers and preachers of the Word.

Ver. 3.—Having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first; more accurately rendered, *having followed up* (or, *investigated*) *step by step all things from their source*. St. Luke, without depreciating the accounts of the life and work of Jesus then current in the Church, here sets out his reasons for undertaking a fresh compilation. His Gospel would differ from the early Gospels: (1) By going back much further than they did. It is doubtful if these primitive Gospels began earlier than with the ministry of John and the baptism of Jesus.

St. Mark's Gospel—which, perhaps, represents one of the earliest forms of the apostles' preaching and teaching,—does not go further back than those events. St. Luke gave Theophilus, among other early details, a history of the incarnation and the infancy of the Blessed One. (2) By presenting the whole story in a consecutive form. Hitherto, apparently, “apostolic tradition probably had a more or less fragmentary character: the apostles not relating every time the whole of the facts, but only those which best answered to the circumstances in which they were teaching.

This is expressly said of St. Peter, on the testimony of Papias, or of the old presbyter on whom he relied:

Πρὸς τὴν χρείαν ἐποιεῖτο τὴν διδασκαλίαν (‘He chose each time the facts appropriate to the needs of his hearers’). Important omissions would easily result from this mode of telling the great story” (Godet). **Most excellent Theophilus**. The term rendered “most excellent” (κράτιστε) denotes that the friend of Luke for whom nominally his Gospel was written was a man of high rank in the Roman world of that day.

Nothing is known of his history. He was most likely, from Luke's connection with Antioch, a noble of that great and wealthy city, and may fairly be taken as a representative of that cultured thoughtful class for whom in a measure St. Luke especially wrote. The title κράτιστε, by which the Theophilus is here addressed, we find several times applied to high Roman officials, such as Felix and Festus (Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25). - (PULPIT COMMENTARY)

1 Luke Chapter 1

The Gospel is written to Theophilus, whose name means ‘friend of God’. From this name we can instantly connect this book to the Acts of the Apostles, a book which is also addressed to Theophilus (Acts 1:1), and also written by Luke.

The prologue (1:1-4)

The opening verses reveal that the author was fully aware of other writings of the life of Jesus.

He speaks of ‘many’ who have written of him (v. 1). Luke makes it clear that his Gospel is in no way written to challenge the events as recorded by others, but that he wished to write them in strict chronological order. He writes to confirm the certainty of the things that were already believed.

Luke 1:5–25

⁵There was in the days of Herodes, the sovereign of Yehudāh, a certain priest named Zeḱaryah, of the division of Aḇiyah. And his wife was of the daughters of Aharon, and her name was Elisheḇa.

⁶And they were both righteous before Elohim, blamelessly walking in all the commands and righteousnesses of יהוה.⁷ And they had no child, because Elisheba was barren, and both were advanced in years.⁸ And it came to be, that while he was serving as priest before Elohim in the order of his division,⁹ according to the institute of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to burn incense when he went into the Dwelling Place of יהוה.¹⁰ And the entire crowd of people was praying outside at the hour of incense.¹¹ And a messenger of יהוה appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

¹²And when Zeḱaryah saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.¹³ But the messenger said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zeḱaryah, for your prayer is heard. And your wife Elisheḃa shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Yoḥanan.¹⁴” And you shall have joy and gladness, and many shall rejoice at his birth.¹⁵ “For he shall be great before יהוה, and shall drink no wine and strong drink at all. And he shall be filled with the Set-apart Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.¹⁶ “And he shall turn many of the children of Yisra’ēl to יהוה their Elohim.

¹⁷ “And he shall go before Him in the spirit and power of Ĕliyahu, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the insight of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for יהוה.”¹⁸ And Zeḱaryah said to the messenger, “By what shall I know this? For I am old, and my wife advanced in years.”¹⁹ And the messenger answering, said to him, “I am Gabṛi’ēl, who stands in the presence of Elohim, and was sent to speak to you and announce to you this good news.

²⁰“But see, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day this takes place, because you did not believe my words which shall be filled in their appointed time.”²¹ And the people waited for Zeḱaryah, and marvelled at his delay in the Dwelling Place.²² And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them. And they recognised that he had seen a vision in the Dwelling Place, for he was beckoning to them and remained dumb.²³ And it came to be, as soon as the days of his service were completed, he went away to his house.²⁴ And after those days his wife Elisheḃa conceived.

And she hid herself five months, saying,²⁵ “יהוה has done this for me, in the days when He looked upon me, to take away my reproach among men.”

Ver. 5—ch. 2:52.—THE GOSPEL OF THE INFANCY. The critical reader of the Gospel in the original Greek is here startled by the abrupt change in the style of writing. The first four verses, which constitute the introduction, are written in pure classical language; the sentences are balanced, almost with a rhythmical accuracy. They are the words evidently of a highly cultured mind, well versed in Greek thought. But in the fifth verse, where the history of the eventful period really begins, all is changed.

The narrative flows on clearly with a certain picturesqueness of imagery; the style is simple, easy, vivid; but at once the reader is sensible that he has passed out of the region of Greek and Western thought. The language is evidently a close translation from some Hebrew original; the imagery is exclusively Jewish, and the thoughts belong to the story of the chosen people. It is clear that this section of St. Luke's writing, which ends, however, with ch. 2, is not derived from apostolic tradition, but is the result of his own investigation into the origin of the faith of Christ, gathered probably from the lips of the virgin mother herself, or from one of the holy

women belonging to her kinsfolk who had been with her from the beginning of the wondrous events. St. Luke reproduced, as faithfully as he could in a strange tongue, the revelations—some perhaps written, some no doubt oral, communicated to him, we reverently believe, by the blessed mother of Jesus herself. The story of these two chapters is what St. Luke evidently alludes to when, in his short preface (ver. 3), he writes of his “perfect understanding in all things from the very first.”

Ver. 5.—There was in the days of Herod, the King of Judæa. The Herod here alluded to was the one surnamed “the Great.”

The event here related took place towards the end of his reign. His dominions, besides Judæa, included Samaria, Galilee, and a large district of Peræa. This prince played a conspicuous part in the politics of his day. He was no Hebrew by birth, but an Idumæan, and he owed his position entirely to the favour of Rome, whose vassal he really was during his whole reign. The Roman senate had, on the recommendation of Antony and Octavius, granted to this prince the title of “King of Judæa.” It was a strange, sad state of things.

The land of promise was ruled over by an Idumæan adventurer, a creature of the great Italian Republic; the holy and beautiful house on Mount Zion was in the custody of an Edomite usurper; the high priest of the Mighty One of Jacob was raised up or deposed as the officials of Rome thought good. Truly the sceptre had departed from Judah.

A certain priest named Zacharias; usually spelt among the Hebrews, *Zechariah*; it means—“Remembered of Jehovah,” and was a favourite name among the chosen people. **Of the course of Abia.** (course) signified originally “a daily service.”

It was subsequently used for a group of priests who exercised their priestly functions in the temple for a week, and then gave place to another group. From Eleazar and Ithamar, the two surviving sons of the first high priest Aaron, had descended twenty-four families. Among these King David distributed by lot the various tabernacle (subsequently temple) services, each family group, or course, officiating for eight days—from sabbath to sabbath. From the Babylonish exile, of these twenty-four families only four returned. With the idea of reproducing as nearly as possible the old state of things, these four were subdivided into twenty-four, the twenty-four bearing the original

family names, and this succession of courses continued in force until the fall of Jerusalem and the burning of the temple, A.D. 70. According to Josephus, Zacharias was especially distinguished by belonging to the first of the twenty-four courses, or families.

Of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth; identical with *Elisheba*. “One whose oath is to God.” Both the husband and wife traced their lineage back to the first high priest—A coveted distinction in Israel.

Ver. 6.—**And they were both righteous before God.** “One of the oldest terms of high praise among the Jews (Gen. 6:9; 7:1; 18:23–28;

Ezek. 18:5–9, etc.). It is used also of Joseph (Matt. 1:19), and is defined in the following words in the most technical sense of strict legal observance, which it had acquired since the days of Maccabees. The true Jashar (upright man) was the ideal Jew. Thus Rashi calls the Book of Genesis ‘The book of the upright, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’ ” (Farrar).

Ver. 7.—**And they had no child.** This, as is well known, was a heavy calamity in a Hebrew home. In the childless house there was no hope of the long looked-for Messiah being born in it.

It was not unfrequently looked on as a mark of the Divine displeasure, possibly as the punishment of some grave sin.

Ver. 9.—**His lot was to burn incense**; more accurately, *he obtained by lot the duty of entering and offering incense*. The office of burning incense gave the priest to whom this important lot fell the right of entering the holy place. It was the most coveted of all the priestly duties. The Talmud says the priest who obtained the right to perform this high duty was not permitted to draw the lot a second time in the same week, and as the whole number of priests at this time was very large—some say even as many as twenty thousand—Farrar

conjectures that it would never happen to the same priest twice in his lifetime to enter that sacred spot.

Ver. 10.—**And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.** This would indicate that the day in question was a sabbath or some high day. Dean Plumptre suggests that, lost among that praying crowd, were, “we may well believe, the aged Simeon (ch. 2:25) and Anna the prophetess (ch. 2:36), and many others who waited for redemption in Jerusalem.”

Ver. 11.—And there appeared unto him as angel of the Lord.

Critics have especially found grave fault with this “Hebrew” portion of our Gospel, complaining that it needlessly introduces the marvellous, and brings uselessly into everyday life beings from another sphere. Godet well answers these criticisms by observing “that as Christianity was an entirely new beginning in history, the second and final creation of man, it was natural that an interposition on so grand a scale should be accompanied by a series of particular interpositions. It was even necessary; for how were the representatives of the ancient order of things, who had to co-operate in the new work, to be

initiated into it, and their attachment won to it, except by this means? According to Scripture, we are surrounded by angels (2 Kings 6:17; Ps. 34:7), whom God employs to watch over us; but in our ordinary condition we want the sense necessary to perceive their presence—for that condition a peculiar receptivity is required. This condition was given to Zacharias. Origen ('Contra Celsum') writes how, "in a church there are two assemblies—one of angels, the other of men, ... angels are present at our prayers, and they pray with us and for us." **Standing on the right side of the altar of incense.** The angel stood between the altar and the

shew-bread table. On entering the holy place, the officiating priest would have on his right the table with the shew-bread, on his left the great candlestick, and before him would be the golden altar, which stood at the end of the holy place, in front of the veil which separated this chamber and the dim, silent holy of holies.

Ver. 12.—**He was troubled.** This was ever the first effect produced by the sight of a spirit-visitant.

Ver. 13.—**Thy prayer is heard.** What was the nature of this prayer? The Greek word used here implies that some *special* supplication had been offered, and which the angel tells had been listened to at the throne of grace. The righteous old

man had not, as some have thought, been praying for a son,—he had long resigned himself in this private sorrow to the will of his God; but we may well suppose that on that solemn occasion he prayed the unselfish patriotic prayer that the long looked for Messiah would hasten his coming. **His name John**; the shortened form for *Jehochanan*, “the grace of Jehovah.” Under various diminutives, such as Jonah, it was a favourite Hebrew name.

From Addresses on the Gospel of Luke – Henry A. Ironside:

“Thou shalt call his name John” (ver. 13). What a wonderful thing for a heavenly messenger to give the name for a child! We have

several instances like that in Scripture. God told Abraham that he was to call his son “Isaac.” Here the angel named the child that he said would be born, “John.” It simply means, “The grace of Jehovah.”

This son who was to be born was to be the means of bringing joy and gladness to many people, and first of all to his own parents. “Thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord” (vers. 14, 15). You remember what the Lord Jesus Himself said of him later on; that “of those who were born of women there was none greater

than John the Baptist. And yet he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” This man was great, destined to be great, because he was to prepare the way for the coming of the King. He was to baptize the King and to present Him to Israel, but he himself was to go home to be with God, as a result of Herod’s bitter cruelty, before he saw the new order fully established here in the earth. Therefore, the very least who now receives Christ and enters into the kingdom of God occupies a greater position than John the Baptist himself. He said, “The King is coming.” We can say, “Thank God, He has come, and

we are definitely linked up with Him.”

John was to be a Nazarite. Long years before, when God gave the Law, He said that if any in Israel were especially devoted to the Lord, they were to keep away from anything that came from the vine tree. They were not even to touch dried raisins or any other product of the vine, because the vine itself was the symbol of joy, and these men gave up the joys of earth in order that they might be more wholly devoted to God Himself. Then there were other regulations laid upon them. They were not to become defiled by coming near any dead body.

They were to grow long hair, indicating the place of dependence, until the days of their Nazariteship were fulfilled. Samson was to be a Nazarite from his birth, and he became weak when he allowed his long hair to be cut. John the Baptist also was to be a Nazarite from his birth. He was to be wholly devoted to the service of the Lord from the very beginning. But more than that, he was to be especially, singularly marked out and empowered by the Holy Spirit even from the moment he came into the world. We read: "He shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink;

and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God" (vers. 15, 16).

God prepared him from his earliest days for the great mission that he was to fulfil. I think you will often find that when the Lord selects a man for some special work, He puts His hand upon him very early in life and impresses upon him the possibility and the joyful privilege of becoming His messenger to a lost and needy world. How many of God's servants who have had a great ministry throughout the years were called as little

children, children of godly parents, and from their earliest days were made acquainted with the things of the Lord, exercised in regard to their responsibility to God, and then when there came the full, clear consciousness of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, it seemed as though nothing could hold them back. Young as they were, they began proclaiming the unsearchable riches of Christ.

John, then, was called from his very babyhood to be Christ's servant, and the assurance was given: "Many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God" (ver. 16). His coming

had been foretold back in the book of Isaiah. The Holy Spirit definitely spoke of the coming of this one into the world. In the fortieth chapter, beginning with verse 3, we read: “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it” (vers. 3–5). This was a prophecy

uttered seven hundred years before John's birth concerning the coming into the world of him who was to be the preparer of the Saviour's way.

And then Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet, speaks of him twice. In chapter 3, verse 1, God says through Malachi: "Behold, I will send My messenger, and he shall prepare the way before Me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts." John the Baptist was that messenger, sent to prepare the way of the Lord. I

might add that here you have clear, definite proof as to the Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, because it was Jehovah whose way was to be thus prepared, and John came to prepare the way of Jesus. The Jesus of the New Testament is the Jehovah of the Old Testament. Then in the last chapter of Malachi, verse 5, we read: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (vers. 5, 6).

This was prophetic of the ministry of John the Baptist. It was not exactly that Elijah himself was coming back from heaven to earth, but John was to come in his energy. Referring again to the first chapter of Luke, verses 16 and 17, we find that they emphasize the fact that John was the messenger of Jehovah. “And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before Him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” The

reference is definitely to the prophecy given in Malachi.

You remember how later on, the apostles came to the Lord Jesus as He spoke of His second coming, and asked, “Why say the scribes that Elias must first come?” Jesus answered them, “Elias is indeed come, and they have done unto him whatsoever they listed”; and then He explained that John came in the spirit and power of Elijah. We have no other scripture intimating that Elijah is yet to come. He has already come in the person of John the Baptist. You may say, “Well, he is to come before the great and dreadful day

of the Lord.” Yes, and so he did! The great and dreadful day of the Lord is still in the future, and we have this dispensation of grace in between; but that is in accordance with all Old Testament prophecy. This present age is all hidden. It is the great parenthesis in God’s plan. “He shall go before Him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just”; that is, to call the people of Israel back to the testimony of the Word of God and to that law which had already been committed to their fathers.

Ver. 14.—**Many shall rejoice at his birth.** The gladness which his boy's birth was to bring with it was to be no mere private family rejoicing. The child of his old age, who was to be born, would be the occasion of a true national joy.

Ver. 15.—**Great in the sight of the Lord.** To the pious old Jewish priest the strange visitant's words would bear a deep signification. Zacharias would quickly catch the angel's thoughts. His son was not to be the Messiah of the people's hope, but was to be like one of those great ones loved of God, of whom the women of Israel sang on their solemn feast-days—one like Samson, only

purser, or Samuel, or the yet greater Elijah. Could all this deep joy be true? **Shall drink neither wine.** The old curse then as now. God's heroes must be free from even the semblance of temptation. They must stamp their high lives, from the beginning, by the solemn vow of self-denial and abstinence. It is remarkable how many of the great deliverers and teachers of the chosen people were commanded from childhood to enrol themselves among the abstainers from all strong drink. **Nor strong drink.** The word includes all kinds of fermented drink except that made from the grape; it was especially applied to *palm* wine.

Ver. 16.—**And many of the**

children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. The state of the people at this period was Indeed unhappy. The dominant Italian power had introduced into Syria and Palestine the vices and profligate life of Italy and Greece. The great Syrian city Antioch, for instance, in vice and sensuality, had gone far beyond her conqueror, and was perhaps at that time the most wicked city in the world. In the court of Herod, patriotism and true nobility were dead. The priests and scribes were for the most part deeply corrupted, and the poor shepherdless common folk only too readily followed the example of the rich and great. The boy who was to be born was to be a

great preacher of righteousness; his glorious mission would be to turn many of these poor wanderers to the Lord their God.

Ver. 17.—**In the spirit and power of Elias.** There was a confident hope among the Jews, dating from the days of the prophecy of Malachi, some four hundred years before the vision of Zacharias, that the days of Messiah would be heralded by an appearance of the Prophet Elijah. The selfsame expectation is still cherished by every pious Jew. **To turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just.** The usual explanation of these words of the angel, who uses here the language of

Malachi (4:5, 6), is that the result of the preaching of this new prophet, who is about to be raised up, will be to restore harmony to the broken and disturbed family life of Israel, whereas now the home life of the chosen race was split up—the fathers, perhaps, siding with the foreign or Roman faction, as represented by Herod and his friends; the sons, on the other hand, being Zealots attached to the national party, bitterly hostile to the Herodians. So also in one house some would belong to the Pharisee, others to the Sadducee, sect. These fatal divisions would, in many cases, be healed by the influence of the coming one. There is, however,

another interpretation far deeper and more satisfactory; for nothing in the preaching of the Baptist, as far as we are aware, bore specially on the domestic dissensions of the people; it had a much wider range. The true sense of the angel's words here should be gathered from prophetic passages such as Isa. 29:22, 23, "Jacob shall no more be ashamed, neither shall his face wax pale, when he seeth (בְּרֵאֲתוֹ כִּי) his children become the work of my hands;" Isa. 63:16, "Doubtless thou art our Father, though Abraham be ignorant of us, and Israel acknowledge us not: thou, O Lord, art our Father, our Redeemer!"—The patriarchs, the fathers of Israel, beholding from their

abodes of rest the works and days of their degenerate children, mourned over their fall, and, to use earthly language, “were ashamed” of the conduct of their unworthy descendants. *These* would be glad and rejoice over the result of the preaching of the coming prophet. Godet well sums up the angel’s words: “It will be John’s mission then to reconstitute the moral unity of the people by restoring the broken relation between the patriarchs and their degenerate descendants.”

Ver. 18.—**Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man.** There was something evidently blamable in this hesitation on the part of Zacharias to receive the angel’s

promise. It seems as though the radiant glory of the messenger, as he stood before the curtain of the silent sanctuary in his awful beauty, ought to have convinced the doubting old man of the truth of the strange message. The words of the angel, which follow, seem to imply this. What! do you doubt my message? “I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of the Eternal.” Others in Old Testament story before—for instance, Abraham (Gen. 15) and Gideon (Judg. 6)—had seen and listened to an angel, had at first doubted, but had received in consequence no rebuke, no punishment, for their want of faith. Zacharias was, however,

condemned, we learn, to a long period of dumbness.

Ver. 19.—**I am Gabriel.** The meaning of the name *Gabriel* is “Hero of God,” or “Mighty One of God.” In the canonical books only two of the heavenly ones are mentioned by *name*. *Gabriel* (here and Dan. 8:16 and 9:21) and *Michael* which signifies “Who is like God” (Jude 9; Rev. 12:7; and in Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1). Of these two blessed spirits whose names are revealed to us in the Word of God, their appointed work seems to be in connection with the human race and its enemies. *Gabriel* is the special messenger of good news. He comes to Daniel, and tells him of the restoration of Jerusalem; to

Zacharias, and announces the birth of his son, and declares what his glorious office would consist in; to Mary of Nazareth, and foretells the nativity. *Michael*, on the other hand, appears as the warrior of God. In the Book of Daniel he wars with the enemies of the people of the Lord; in Jude and in the Revelation of St. John he is the victorious antagonist of Satan the enemy of the Eternal. The Jews have a striking saying that Gabriel flies with two wings, but Michael with only one; so God is swift in sending angels of peace and of joy, of which blessed company the archangel Gabriel is the representative, while the messengers of his wrath and punishment, among

whom Michael holds a chief place,
come slowly. **That stand in the
presence of God.**

“One of the seven
Who in God’s presence, nearest to
his throne,
Stand ready at command, and are
his eyes
That run through all the heavens,
and down to the earth
Bear his swift commands, over
moist and dry,
O’er sea and land.”
(‘Paradise Lost,’ iii. 650.)

Milton derived his knowledge of the *seven* from the apocryphal Book of Tobit, where in ch. 12:15 we read, “I am Raphael, one of the *seven* holy angels, which present the prayers of

the saints, and which go in and out before the glory of the Holy One.” In the very ancient Book of Enoch we read of the names of the four great archangels, Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael.

Ver. 21.—And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple.

The Talmud tells us that even the high priest did not tarry long in the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement. The same feeling of holy awe would induce the ministering priest of the day to perform his functions with no unnecessary delay, and to leave as soon as possible the holy place. The people praying in the court without were in the habit of

waiting until the priest on duty came out of the sacred inner chamber, after which they were dismissed with the blessing. The unusual delay in the appearance of Zacharias puzzled and disturbed the worshippers.

Ver. 22.—When he came out, he could not speak unto them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple. Something in the face of the old man, as, unable to speak, he made signs to the congregation, told the awestruck people that the long delay and the loss of speech were owing to no sudden illness which had seized Zacharias. We know that, in the old days of the desert wanderings, the children of Israel could not bear to

look on the face of Moses when he came down from the mount after dwelling for a brief space in the light of the glory of the Eternal. Zacharias had been face to face with one whose blessed lot it was to stand for ever in the presence of God. We may well suppose that there lingered on the old man's face, as he left the sanctuary, *something* which told the beholder of the presence just left.

Ver. 24.—And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months. Various reasons have been suggested for this retirement. It seems most probable that, amazed at the angelic announcement, the saintly woman went into perfect retirement and

isolation for a considerable period, to prove well the words of the angel, and to consider how she best could do *her* part in the training of the expected child, who was to play so mighty a part in the history of her people.

John's birth announced (1:5-25)

As if to emphasize that this Gospel contains unique material, the first twenty-five verses are found nowhere else. Luke takes us back to the time before John the Baptist was conceived, and introduces us to his parents. Zacharias and Elizabeth were a devout couple who were unable to have children.

Childlessness can cause tremendous secret grief. In biblical times these feelings were compounded by the fact that the community set a great emphasis on childbearing (see v. 25).

Zacharias was a priest and therefore served in the Temple. Herod the Great had constructed, at unimaginable expense, this remarkable edifice. It covered some thirty-five acres. Zacharias had to take it in turns with other priests to conduct the public worship of God and pray for the nation. One day he was offering incense before God. That very moment the Lord answered the prayers of many years. He would

have a son.

The promise (1:11-20)

The angel Gabriel appeared and told Zacharias that the child was to be called John, which means 'Jehovah has been gracious'. God was performing a miracle of grace in the life of this couple. John must live as a Nazirite, that is, an Israelite especially consecrated to God. Such a person was forbidden to drink wine or even grape juice, so that all his strength and joy would be seen to come from God alone, and not from alcohol.

In verse 17, the angel clearly links John to the last verse of the Old Testament. Here we see the

unity and continuity of the Bible, and that John's ministry would fulfil the final promise of the Hebrew Scriptures (Mal. 4:5, 6).

Zacharias was unsure. In verse 20 the angel Gabriel told him that he would be unable to speak until *after* John was born, because, 'you did not believe my words'. We see here the importance of trusting in the power of God to do the impossible (see v. 37). Doubt is always a stain upon one's character, and God regards questioning his word as a sin rather than merely a weakness.

The days that followed (1:21-25)

Subsequently a very unusual situation arises: a husband unable to speak, and his wife, Elizabeth, though long past childbearing age, expecting a baby and living in seclusion from the world. In a sense Elizabeth's isolation was just the right prelude for the life of John the Baptist himself. He would one day live far from the multitudes in the wilderness, hearing the voice of God, surrounded by the deep silence of the desert.

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⁵⁷ And the time was filled for Elisheḃa to give birth, and she bore a son.⁵⁸ And her neighbours and relatives heard how יהוה had shown great compassion to her, and they rejoiced with her.⁵⁹ And it came to be, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child. And they were calling him by the name of his father, Zeḃaryah.⁶⁰ And his mother answering, said, “Not so, but he shall be called Yoḥanan.”⁶¹ And they said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name.”⁶² Then they motioned to his father, what he would like him to be called.⁶³ And having asked for a writing tablet, he wrote, saying,

“Yoḥanan is his name.” And they all marvelled.⁶⁴ And at once his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he was speaking, praising Elohim.⁶⁵ And fear came on all those dwelling around them, and all these matters were spoken of in all the hill country of Yehuḏah.⁶⁶ And all who heard them kept them in their hearts, saying, “What then shall this child be?” And the hand of יהוה was with him.

Luke 1:67–80

⁶⁷And Zeḱaryah, his father, was filled with the Set-apart Spirit, and prophesied, saying,⁶⁸ “Blessed be יהוה Elohim of Yisra’ěl, for He did look upon and worked redemption

for His people,⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of deliverance for us in the house of His servant Dawid,⁷⁰ as He spoke by the mouth of His set-apart prophets, from of old—⁷¹ deliverance from our enemies and from the hand of all those hating us,⁷² to show compassion toward our fathers and to remember His set-apart covenant,⁷³ an oath which He swore to our father Abraham:⁷⁴ to give to us, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, to serve Him without fear,⁷⁵ in set-apartness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.⁷⁶“And you, child, shall be called prophet of the Most High, for you shall go

before the face of יהוה to prepare His ways,⁷⁷ to give knowledge of deliverance to His people, by the forgiveness of their sins,⁷⁸ through the tender compassion of our Elohim, with which the daybreak from on high has looked upon us,⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts until the day of showing Himself openly to Yisra’ěl.

Vere. 57–80.—John, afterwards called the Baptist, the son of Zarharias and Elisabeth, is born. The

Benedictus.

Ver. 58.—How the Lord had showed great mercy upon her. No doubt the vision of Zacharias in the temple, and his subsequent dumbness, had excited no little inquiry. That the reproach of Elisabeth should be taken away, no doubt few really believed. The birth of her son, however, set a seal upon the reality of the priest's vision. The rejoicings of her family were due to more than the birth of her boy. The story of the angel's message, coupled with the unusual birth, set men thinking and asking what then would be the destiny of this child. Could it be that he was the promised Messiah?

ver. 59.—**On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child.** This was always, among the Hebrew people, a solemn day of rejoicing it resembled in some particulars our baptismal gatherings. Relatives were invited to be present. as witnesses that the child had been formally incorporated into the covenant. It was, too, the time when the name which the newly born was to bear through life was given him.

Ver. 60.—**Not so; but he shall be called John.** It is clear (from ver. 62) that the old priest was afflicted with deafness as well as with dumbness. At the naming ceremony, the stricken Zacharias, who was patiently awaiting the hour when his God

should restore to him his lost powers, made no effort to express his will. He had already in the past months, no doubt, written down for Elisabeth the name of the boy that was to be born. She interrupts the ceremony with her wishes. The guests are surprised, and make signs to the father. He at once writes on his tablets, "His name is John." The name had been already given. The word "John" signifies "the grace of Jehovah."

Ver. 63.—**A writing-table**; better, a *writing-tablet*. The tablets in use generally at the time were usually made of wood, covered with a thin coating of wax; on the soft layer of wax the words were written with an iron stylus.

Ver. 64.—And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God. This, the first hour of his recovered power, was without doubt the occasion of his giving utterance to the inspired hymn (the Benedictus) which is recorded at length a few verses further on (vers. 68–79). It was the outcome, no doubt, of his silent communing with the Spirit during the long months of his affliction.

Ver. 65—And fear came on all that dwelt round about them: and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judæa. The inspired utterance of the old priest, so long

dumb, in his beautiful hymn of praise, completed as it were the strange cycle of strange events which had happened in the priestly family.

Ver. 66.—**And the hand of the Lord was with him.** This kind of pause in the history is one of the peculiarities of St. Luke's style. We meet with it several times in the gospel story and in the history of the Acts. They are vivid pictures in a few words of what happened to an individual, to a family, or to a cause, during often a long course of years. Here the story of the childhood of the great pioneer of Christ is briefly sketched out; in it all, and through it all, there was one guiding hand—the Lord's. The expression, "hand of the

Lord,” was peculiarly a Hebrew thought—one of the vivid anthropomorphic idioms which, as has been aptly remarked, they could use more boldly than other nations, because they had clearer thoughts of God as not made after the similitude of men (Deut. 4:12).

Ver. 67.—His father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying.

Zacharias’s Hymn

Expositions of Holy Scripture: Luke 1–12
-- MacLaren, Alexander

Luke 1:67–80

ZACHARIAS was dumb when he disbelieved. His lips were opened when he believed. He is the last of the Old Testament prophets, and as standing nearest to the Messiah, his song takes up the echoes of all the past, and melts them into a new outpouring of exultant hope. The strain is more impassioned than Mary's, and throbs with triumph over 'our enemies,' but rises.

In the strictest sense, John the Baptist was a prophet of the Old dispensation, even though he came to usher in the New. (See Matt. 11:9–11) In the same sense, Zacharias was the last prophet of the Old dispensation, before the coming of his son to link the Old with the New above the mere

patriotic glow into a more spiritual region. The complete subordination of the personal element is very remarkable, as shown by the slight and almost parenthetical reference to John. The father is forgotten in the devout Israelite. We may take the song as divided into three portions: the first (Luke 1:68–75) celebrating the coming of Messiah, with special reference to its effect in freeing Israel from its foes; the second (Luke 1:76–77), the highly dramatic address to his unconscious ‘child’; the third (Luke 1:78–79) returns to the absorbing thought of the Messiah, but now touches on higher aspects of His coming as the Light to all who sit in darkness.

I. They Had Looked Wearily For The Promised Messiah

If we remember that four hundred dreary years, for the most part of which Israel had been groaning under a foreign yoke, had passed since the last of the prophets, and that during all that time devout eyes had looked wearily for the promised Messiah, we shall be able to form some faint conception of the surprise and rapture which filled Zacharias's spirit, and leaps in his hymn at the thought that now, at last, the hour had struck, and that the child would soon be born who was to fulfil the divine promises and satisfy fainting hopes. No wonder that its first words are a burst of blessing of 'the God of

Israel.’ The best expression of joy, when long-cherished desires are at last on the eve of accomplishment, is thanks to God. How short the time of waiting seems when it is past, and how needless the impatience which marred the waiting! Zacharias speaks of the fact as already realised. He must have known that the Incarnation was accomplished; for we can scarcely suppose that the emphatic tenses ‘hath visited, hath redeemed, hath raised’ are prophetic, and merely imply the certainty of a future event. He must have known, too, Mary’s royal descent; for he speaks of ‘the house of David.’

‘A horn’ of salvation is an emblem taken from animals, and implies

strength. Here it recalls several prophecies, and as a designation of the Messiah, shadows forth His conquering might, all to be used for deliverance to His people. The vision before Zacharias is that of a victor king of Davidic race, long foretold by prophets, who will set Israel free from its foreign oppressors, whether Roman or Idumean, and in whom God Himself ‘visits and redeems His people.’ There are two kinds of divine visitations—one for mercy and one for judgment. What an unconscious witness it is of men’s evil consciences that the use of the phrase has almost exclusively settled down upon the latter meaning! In Luke 1:71–75, the idea of the Messianic salvation

is expanded and raised. The word 'salvation' is best construed, as in the Revised Version, as in apposition with and explanatory of 'horn of salvation.' This salvation has issues, which may also be regarded as God's purposes in sending it. These are threefold: first, to show mercy to the dead fathers of the race. That is a striking idea, and pictures the departed as, in their solemn rest, sharing in the joy of Messiah's coming, and perhaps in the blessings which He brings. We may not too closely press the phrase, but it is more than poetry or imagination. The next issue is God's remembrance of His promises, or in other words, His fulfilment of these. The last is that the

nation, being set free, should serve God. The external deliverance was in the eyes of devout men like Zacharias precious as a means to an end. Political freedom was needful for God's service, and was valuable mainly as leading to that. The hymn rises far above the mere impatience of a foreign yoke. 'Freedom to worship God,' and God worshipped by a ransomed nation, are Zacharias's ideal of the Messianic times.

Note his use of the word for priestly 'service.' He, a priest, has not forgotten that by original constitution all Israel was a nation of priests; and he looks forward to the fulfilment at last of the ideal which so soon became

impracticable, and possibly to the abrogation of his own order in the universal priesthood. He knew not what deep truths he sang. The end of Christ's coming, and of the deliverance which He works for us from the hand of our enemies, cannot be better stated than in these words. We are redeemed that we may be priests unto God. Our priestly service must be rendered in 'holiness and righteousness,' in consecration to God and discharge of all obligations; and it is to be no interrupted or occasional service, like Zacharias's, which occupied but two short weeks in the year, and might never again lead him within the sanctuary, but is to fill with

reverent activity and thankful sacrifice all our days. However this hymn may have begun with the mere external conception of Messianic deliverance, it rises high above that here, and will still further soar beyond it. We may learn from this priest-prophet, who anticipated the wise men and brought his offerings to the unborn Christ, what Christian salvation is, and for what it is given us.

II. There Is Something Very Vivid And Striking In The Abrupt Address To The Infant,

Who lay, all unknowing, in his mother's arms. The contrast between him as he was then and the work which waited him, the paternal wonder and

joy which yet can scarcely pause on the child, and hurries on to fancy him in the years to come, going herald-like before the face of the Lord, the profound prophetic insight into John's work, are all noteworthy. The Baptist did 'prepare the way' "by teaching that the true 'salvation' was not to be found in mere deliverance from the Roman yoke, but in 'remission of sin.' He thus not only gave 'knowledge of salvation,' in the sense that he announced the fact that it would be given, but also in the sense that he clearly taught in what it consisted. John was no preacher of revolt, as the turbulent and impure patriots of the day would have liked him to be, but of repentance. His work

was to awake the consciousness of sin, and so to kindle desires for a salvation which was deliverance from sin, the only yoke which really enslaves.

Zacharias the 'blameless' saw what the true bondage of the nation was, and what the work both of the Deliverer and of His herald must be. We need to be perpetually reminded of the truth that the only salvation and deliverance which can do us any good consist in getting rid, by pardon and by holiness, of the cords of our sins.

III. The Forerunner Of The Messianic Blessings.

The thoughts of the Forerunner and his office melt into that of the Messianic blessings from which the

singer cannot long turn away. In these closing words, we have the source, the essential nature, and the blessed results of the gift of Christ set forth in a noble figure, and freed from the national limitations of the earlier part of the hymn. All comes from the 'bowels of mercy of our God,' as Zacharias, in accordance with Old Testament metaphor, speaks, allocating the seat of the emotions which we attribute to the heart. Conventional notions of delicacy think the Hebrew idea coarse, but the one allocation is just as delicate as the other. We can get no deeper down or farther back into the secret springs of things than this, that the root cause of

all, and most especially of the mission of Christ, is the pitying love of God's heart. If we hold fast by that, the pain of the riddle of the world is past, and the riddle itself more than half solved. Jesus Christ is the greatest gift of that love, in which all its tenderness and all its power are gathered up for our blessing.

The modern civilised world owes most of its activity to the quickening influence of Christianity. The dayspring visits us that it may shine on us, and it shines that it may guide us into 'the way of peace.' There can be no wider and more accurate description of the end of Christ's mission than this—that all His visitation and enlightenment are

meant to lead us into the path where we shall find peace with God, and therefore with ourselves and with all mankind. The word ‘peace,’ in the Old Testament, is used to include the sum of all that men require for their conscious wellbeing. We are at rest only when all our relations with God and the outer world are right, and when our inner being is harmonised with itself, and supplied with appropriate objects. To know God for our friend, to have our being fixed on and satisfied in Him, and so to be reconciled to all circumstances, and a friend of all men—this is peace; and the path to such a blessed condition is shown us only by that Sun of

Righteousness whom the loving heart of God has sent into the darkness and torpor of the benighted wanderers in the desert. The national reference has faded from the song, and though it still speaks of 'us' and 'our,' we cannot doubt that Zacharias both saw more deeply into the salvation which Christ would bring than to limit it to breaking an earthly yoke, and deemed more worthily and widely of its sweep, than to confine it within narrower bounds than the whole extent of the dreary darkness which it came to banish from all the world.

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