

## Study One Luke 1:1-38

### Background Bits

God has been silent for 400 years. The people of Israel are slaves within their own land longing for rescue from their Roman rulers and looking forward to their promised king, the Christ, the messiah. This person had been promised throughout their history – key passages are:

2 Samuel 7:12-13, Isaiah 9:1-7, Isaiah 11, Isaiah 40:1-11, Jeremiah 33:14-18, Ezekiel 34:23 -31

These are just a few of the promises about the hope that Israel had for a future king who would lead them to be a glorious nation.

### Old Testament Language and ideas

#### • *The Temple*

The temple was the place where God dwelt with his people cf. 1 Kings 9:3. The regulations for morning and evening prayer are set out in cf. Exodus 30:7-8. For Zechariah to have the opportunity to serve at evening prayer was a once in a lifetime opportunity. He would have been offering the incense just outside of the holy of holies. This place is central to the people of Israel and it is in this place that God sends his messenger to speak to a man whose name means ‘God remembers’ after a period of silence which had lasted nearly 400 years.

#### • *The Angel of the Lord*

The Angel of the Lord often represents God Himself cf. Gen 16:7-13, Ex 3:2-4. Only a heavenly being had the right to appear in the Holy Place with the priest and this is Gabriel who stood in the presence of God. This message is from the highest authority. God is intervening at last into human history.

#### • *The Nazarite*

John was born of a priestly family set apart for God. The abstinence of wine may suggest the Nazarite vow cf. Num 6:1-12 or it may be connected to the idea that priests abstained from strong drink prior to entering the tabernacle therefore John was to be a priestly figure who called the people to repentance. This was part of the priests role (although they failed often) cf. Malachi 2:7

#### • *The spirit and power of Elijah*

The Old Testament prophets repeatedly called the people to repent and turn back to God. Elijah was called to this during the reign of Ahab who was one the worst kings in the history of Israel. There are more chapters about Elijah’s life in the history books of Israel than any of the other prophets cf. 1 Kings 17-19, 21, 2 Kings 1-2. Elijah was hated by the king and feared for his life. John likewise speaks against a king and eventually loses his life. The Old Testament prophecies had ended with a promise of the return of Elijah before the Lord came cf. Malachi 4:5-6. This prophecy is being fulfilled.

- *The Davidic Promise*

The angel is promising the fulfilment of the Davidic promise

*2 Samuel*

7:9 'a great name'

7:13 'the throne of his kingdom'

7:14 'he will be my son'

7:16 'your house and your kingdom'

*Luke*

1:32 'he will be great'

1:32 'throne of his father David'

1:32 'son of the Most High'

1:32 'king over the house of Jacob forever'

NB. The house of Jacob is synonymous with Israel.

See also Psalm 2 and Psalm 89:26-29.

## **Difficult bits**

- **Cross-referencing**

This passage is full of OT allusions. Luke is seeking to show all that had been fulfilled so although many scholars believe he was writing to a gentile Theophilus he did not compromise on referring to whole of salvation history. The Old Testament fulfilment is the gospel (Romans 1:1-2). However for a seeker it may be daunting to spend a lot of time cross-referencing and distract from the main message before them. How much background should be gone into is a wisdom call. If the passage cannot be understood without the cross-reference then it should be given otherwise try to fill in the gaps with simple brief summaries. As someone goes on in their faith a deeper understanding of the whole bible will be part of their spiritual journey.

- **Angels and prophecies**

Starting an evangelistic bible study with a passage that deals in the supernatural head on may seem daunting in our secular age. However, it was said by Francis Schaeffer that this is a helpful apologetic because all too often people think Christianity is simply a moral or ethical code and our conversations are framed that way too; introducing angels into any conversation immediately flags up loud and clear that we are not dealing with a set of rules to follow, but with something fundamentally other-worldly.

- **Childlessness**

For those who live with the pain of childlessness this passage may be clung to as a potential hope that God will answer their prayers for a child if they are righteous like Elizabeth and Zechariah. The mention of the godliness of Zechariah and Elizabeth in Luke 1:6 was put in by Luke to show that their childlessness was not a punishment from God. Elizabeth and Zechariah faced childlessness because they lived in a fallen world.

This passage does not teach that the 'righteous' will have their prayers for a child answered. There is no such promise to be found here. (for further reading see 'Just the two of us?' by Eleanor Margesson and Sue McGowan IVP).

It is interesting that in the past God has given children to the barren at a key moment in salvation history i.e. Abraham and Sarah Gen 18:10-15, 21:1-7, 1 Samuel 1. John's birth fits into this pattern to show that God is breaking into human history in a supernatural way. Jesus's birth is even greater as Luke reinforces with his use of the word 'virgin' (Lk 1:22).

**•These are lengthy stories**

For someone exploring these stories for the first time this study may seem long. It is helpful to see that these stories are paralleled with one another:

The angel appears  
Zechariah and Mary are afraid  
The angel reassures them  
There is a promise of a child  
They respond with a question.  
The angel answers.

Using this parallel reveals a difference between Zechariah and Mary. Mary believes despite her fear but Zechariah doubts. This can lead us to ask what our response would be but in doing so it is important not to lose sight of the main point of this passage which is the amazing fact that God was sending two children who were the fulfilment of all that He had planned in the Old Testament.

**• The incredible claims made for Jesus!**

Luke sets up his hero of the story with incredible claims about his identity. This may seem too much too soon but the key thing is to encourage the reader to come back for more and check out whether or not they consider Jesus lived up to all this hype!