

Wednesday Evening Bible Study

October 31, 2018

The Gospel of Luke

The Forerunners to the Forerunner

Topics – Luke 1; Zacharias, Elizabeth, John the Baptist

Text – Luke 1:5 – 25

Introduction

John the Baptist is known as “the forerunner” for the Lord Jesus Christ. However, before Luke discusses the forerunner, he introduces the parents of the forerunner – Zacharias and Elizabeth. Luke really is writing an “in order” account of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. He goes way back to the beginning and does miss any details.

We are introduced to several prominent characters in this opening chapter of Luke’s gospel.

1 Herod

The Herodian Dynasty was found nowhere in the Old Testament, but here in these opening verses of Luke, we are told that the king of Judaea is a man named Herod.

The following are notes from a paper I did on the Herodian Dynasty:

The New Testament Herods were the bitter enemies of Christ and His gospel, but they played a huge roll in the grand scheme of the New Testament world. In order to fully understand the culture and context of Palestine during the time of Christ and beyond, it is important to find out who these Herods were: where they came from and what contributions, if any, they made to Palestine prior to and during the New Testament time period.

The Herodian Dynasty gained strength toward the end of the Second Temple Period.¹ For decades the land of Palestine was fought over by the Ptolemies and the Seleucids who were holdovers from the division of the old Greek Empire. Israel suffered as their land was traded back and forth, particularly when an extremely evil and anti-Semitic Ptolemaic ruler, Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) was in control. His animosity toward the Jews triggered a revolt, which, with the help of the Romans, eventually drove Antiochus from the land.² The nation went through almost an evolution of leadership, which included the Maccabees and the Hasmoneans. Eventually, however, the family of Antipater, the father of Herod the Great, brokered a deal with Pompey of Rome and took control of Palestine.³ This partnership with Rome would remain in place and would continue to secure a role for the Herods in Israel’s government for a century, though the relationship was tenuous at best.

Herod the Great was known as Herod the King (Matthew 2:1; Luke 1:5) and was in power at the time of the birth of Christ. His reign as governor of Galilee began in 47 B.C., but his authority was expanded to king in 37 B.C. He may have been nominally Jewish through circumcision, but he was really an Edomite by blood.⁴ His allegiance was mainly to the Roman government, and he was despised by the Jews. Unger states, “Herod was not only an Idumaeen in race and a Jew in religion, but he was a heathen in practice and a monster in character.”⁵ A striking example of his barbarism was demonstrated when Herod was

¹ Köstenberger, Andreas J.; Kellum, L. Scott; Quarles, Charles L. *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Kindle Locations 3043-3045). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² Josephus, Flavius. *The Wars of the Jews; or the history of the destruction of Jerusalem* (Kindle Locations 173-175). Kindle Edition.

³ Hoehner, H. W. (1988). *Herod, Herodian Family*. In *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (Vol. 1, p. 964). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

⁴ Ryrie, C. C. (1994). *Ryrie study Bible: King James Version* (Expanded ed., p. 1418). Chicago: Moody Press.

⁵ Unger, Merrill F. *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (p. 557). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

just given power. He slew all of the members of the Sanhedrin, which had previously opposed him, and had them all replaced with a fresh group who would be submissive to his control.⁶ He was not much nicer to his family. Wiersbe tells us, “He had nine wives (some say ten), and he thought nothing of slaying his own sons or wives if they got in the way of his plans.”⁷ Phillips comments:

Herod filled Jerusalem with foreign mercenaries and the cities of Palestine with spies. No man or woman was safe while Herod reigned. One by one he murdered every rival claimant to the throne. He stamped out the Hasmoneans; he murdered his wife’s brother, a lad of seventeen, because he was popular with the Jews; he murdered Mariamne, the beautiful Maccabean princess he had married, because he was suspicious of her, and he murdered both her sons; five days before his death he murdered his son and heir. Herod hacked and hewed his way through life, slaughtering six to eight-thousand of the best people in his realm. Caesar Augustus is reported to have cynically said, “I’d sooner be Herod’s swine than Herod’s son.”⁸

He was a brutal despot who murdered anyone who threatened his authority.⁹ He saw Jesus, though a mere babe in a manger in Bethlehem, as just such a threat to his power: so much so that he had every child two years of age and under in Bethlehem executed so that any potential risk would be eliminated. (Matthew 2:16)

Despite all of Herod the Great’s sinister flaws, he did manage to accomplish some very beneficial improvements to Palestine. Herod was a builder. Unfortunately, much of what he built was on the backs of the Jews that he forced to work for him. He built eleven fortresses throughout Israel, which would offer him protection from any surprise enemy attack that might come.¹⁰ Many of the ruins of these fortresses have survived and can be examined today. These ruins include Macherus, located in the area of Perea, and Herodium, which is near Bethlehem and also provided Herod with a luxurious seven-story palace. Recent discoveries by the Hebrew University confirm that Herod was buried there.¹¹

Perhaps the most famous fortress built by Herod was Masada, located near the western shore of the Dead Sea. Masada is the Hebrew word for “stronghold”, and this particular fortress lived up to its name. It was a very narrow plateau that sat upon high cliffs. Access to the top was granted only through a small, winding path that severely limited the number of visitors (or attackers). According to Hester, Masada had many storerooms for food and weapons, and “several elaborate Roman bathhouses with steam heat.”¹² Ironically, it would be this Roman supported fortress that would serve as the last holdout for a group of Jews that escaped from Jerusalem after its destruction by Titus in 70 A.D. The Roman pursuers had to build a ramp to ascend to the top, and a wall to prevent the Jews escape. The whole business took more than two years, and when they finally were able to bring their army to the top, they discovered that the Jewish zealots had all killed themselves rather than be taken by the Romans.¹³

Herod also built the City of Caesarea, which became the largest city in Israel, even surpassing Jerusalem. It was named after Augustus Caesar and took a decade to build. Caesarea was a valuable port city, which boasted a magnificent theater, pools, a sewer system, and an aqueduct for fresh water. The builders of the city were also said to have discovered a means of pouring a concrete type mixture that hardened

⁶ Josephus, Flavius. *The Antiquities of the Jews by Josephus [Annotated Edition]* (Halcyon Classics) (Kindle Locations 11859-11862). Halcyon Press Ltd. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 49). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

⁸ Phillips, J. (2014). *Exploring the Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Mt 2:2). Kregel Publications; WORDsearch.

⁹ Hester, Richard H. (2008) *New Testament Bible History* (p. 41). Blacktown, NSW, AU: www.missionaryoutpost.com.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid* (p. 42).

¹² *ibid* (p. 41).

¹³ *ibid.*

under water.¹⁴ Caesarea is mentioned sixteen times in the Gospels and Acts. It was the seat of Roman authority in Palestine, and the home of Pontius Pilate. Baker Encyclopedia states: “Three Roman governors of Palestine lived there: Felix (Acts 24), Festus (Acts 25:1, 4, 6, 13), and Pontius Pilate, who visited Jerusalem on special occasions (as in John 19). Archaeologists found Pilate’s name carved in stone in the theater at Caesarea.”¹⁵

Perhaps the crowning architectural achievement of Herod the Great was the building of the Temple, which was mostly completed shortly before his death in 4 B.C. Rabbinic literature claims: “He who has not seen the Temple of Herod has never seen a beautiful building”¹⁶ The Temple was the site of many scenes depicted in the New Testament. When Jesus was tempted by Satan, he was brought to the pinnacle of the Temple. (Matthew 4:5) Jesus cleansed the Temple twice: once at the beginning of his earthly ministry (John 2:15); and, once at the end. (Matthew 21:12; Mark 11:15) Jesus taught in the Temple (Matthew 26:55; John 7:28; 8:2; 8:20); He healed in the Temple (Matthew 21:14); and, He rebuked the religious leaders in the Temple. (Mark 11:27 – 33). Jesus used the Temple as an illustration when teaching the disciples about his crucifixion and resurrection. (Matthew 26:61) He also prophesied about the destruction of the Temple. (Matthew 24:1 – 2) When Jesus was crucified, the veil of the Temple was torn from the top to the bottom. (Matthew 27:51) The ministry of Jesus while in Judaea surrounds the Temple. It was the center of religious life for the Jews.

Later, in the Book of Acts, the Temple continues to be an important focal point in the lives and ministries of the Jerusalem apostles, and also in the life of Paul who was arrested in the Temple and accused of defiling it by bringing Gentiles in. (Acts 21:28 – 29)

The New Testament would be an entirely different place without the Temple that was built by Herod. Though Herod was certainly a wicked and cruel man, God still used him to set the scene for the arrival of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Herod the Great passed off the scene shortly after the birth of Christ. We will meet and discuss many of his descendants in the pages of Luke ahead, and also in the Book of Acts. They include: Herod Archelaus, Herod Antipas, Herod Philip, Herod Agrippa I, and Herod Agrippa II.

2 Zacharias

Zacharias’ name means’ “God remembers.” He was a priest, which means he was a Levite from the family of Aaron. He was not the high priest. Work in the temple was divided up in 24 divisions, and each division (or course) was named after its leader. In Zacharias case, the leader of the eighth division was Abia. (See 1 Chronicles 24:1 – 19 – Abijah v. 10) The courses were changed weekly on the Sabbath. Based on twenty-four courses, each course would serve twice in the year or for two weeks.

According to Phillips:

After the Babylonian captivity, only four courses came back to the Promised Land (Ezra 2:36–39; Neh. 7:39–42; 12:1–21). The missing courses were filled by the priests who actually did return.¹⁷

3 Elizabeth

Elizabeth name means’ “His oath.” Together with her husband, their names mean, “God remembers his oath.” God does remember his oaths. In Psalm 89:34 – 37, God says:

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). Caesarea. In Baker encyclopedia of the Bible (Vol. 1, p. 390). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

¹⁶ Hoehner, H. W. (p. 966)

¹⁷ Phillips, J. (2009). Exploring the Gospel of Luke: An Expository Commentary (Lk 1:5–6). Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp.

"My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips. Once have I sworn by my holiness that I will not lie unto David. His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven. Selah." (Psalm 89:34-37)

God was breaking the silence of 400 years, and was about to announce through Zacharias and Elizabeth's son that the Messiah, the Seed of David, was about to re-emerge on the scene.

Elizabeth was also from the priestly line.

4 Gabriel

Gabriel is the messenger angel. The name, Gabriel, means "hero of God". Gabriel also delivers an important message to Daniel in 8:16 and 9:21 – 27. He was also sent to deliver messages from God to Mary in Luke 1:26.

I Godly Ministers (vs. 6 – 10)

Zacharias and Elizabeth were godly people. They had great faith in God and were obedient as best as humanly possible to His ordinances. Righteousness in the Old Testament was imputed by faith just as it is in the New Testament:

"For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness." (Romans 4:3)

"Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." (Galatians 3:6)

"And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God." (James 2:23)

However, true faith in God was followed by obedience because "faith without works is dead." (James 2:20; 26)

You can be obedient without having faith, but if you are a true person of faith, your life will eventually be characterized by obedience. Zacharias and Elizabeth were people of great faith in God that was manifested in great faithfulness to His word.

Practical Point – Are you faithful to the Word of God (commandments and ordinances)?

"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." (James 1:22-27)

"If ye love me, keep my commandments." (John 14:15)

Verse 7 - Elizabeth was barren, and she was beyond child bearing years. Zacharias was old as well. Barrenness was often seen by people as a sign of God's disfavor. (see v. 25; 1 Samuel 1)

Verses 8 – 10 – Zacharias' particular job was to offer incense on the altar of incense. According to Ryrie: "The privilege of burning incense would happen only once in the lifetime of any priest.¹⁸ This was an extreme honor for Zacharias. (See Exodus 30:1 – 10) In Zacharias day, a single priest would offer the incense while the rest of the priests and worshippers remained outside.

Phillips beautifully describes this event in Zacharias' life:

¹⁸ Ryrie, C. C. (1994). Ryrie study Bible: King James Version (Expanded ed., p. 1524). Chicago: Moody Press.

At last, the month of the year arrived when the course of Abia had the service of the sanctuary, and for the first and last time the lot fell on Zacharias to go into the Holy Place of the temple and to burn incense on the golden altar.

He chose two friends to be his helpers. Through the great door of the temple, they went to find themselves surrounded by the golden splendor of the sanctuary and the brilliant colors of the veil. One of his friends removed the remnants of the previous day's offering and reverently backed out of the Holy Place. Then his other priestly friend approached the golden altar and carefully covered its grid with burning coals taken from the great brazen altar where the sacrificial animals were burned. He, too, retired. Zacharias was left alone.

He drew near to the golden altar behind which was the veil. Well did Zacharias know what was beyond the veil—the sacred ark of the covenant with its mercy seat where God had sat enthroned between the cherubim in happier times.

The moment had come. Zacharias advanced and put incense on the fiery coals. Clouds of pungent perfume arose. Its fragrance would cling to him and advertise to everyone that he had been very near to God, whose awesome majesty filled that place.

Outside, the multitudes of the people were praying, anticipating at any moment the return of Zacharias. They were a religious people (1:10), zealous for the law, attentive to the rites and rituals that Moses had commanded. Their ranks included the true, believing remnant of Israel. Little did even these devout worshipers guess what was delaying their priest.¹⁹

Practical Point - Notice that God spoke to Zacharias through the angel when he was busy serving the Lord. God speaks to busy, devoted people.

II A Ghostly Messenger (vs. 11 – 17)

When Zacharias saw the angel, his reaction was typical – fear.

The angel attempts to calm his fears by telling him that God has heard his prayers, and prophesies to him regarding a son, who was to be named John. He specifically alludes to the fact that John would be the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies regarding the forerunner:

"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." (Malachi 3:1)

"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." (Malachi 4:5-6)

Jesus assured his disciples that John was the fulfillment of Malachi 3:1, and he would have been the fulfillment of Malachi 4:5 – 6 had the people received his message. (See Malachi 11:10 and 14)

The angel also promises Zacharias that his son would bring joy, and that he would be "great in the sight of the Lord."

"Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." (Matthew 11:11)

¹⁹ Phillips, J. (2009). Exploring the Gospel of Luke: An Expository Commentary (Lk 1:8–10). Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp.

He also states that he would not drink any wine or strong drink. Some have inferred by this that John was a Nazarite, but the passages mentions nothing about the other conditions of the Nazarite vow; only that he would not drink wine. (See Numbers 6) A Nazarite vow was typically temporary, but both Samson (Judges 16:17), and Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11) were Nazarites for life.

There is, however, a correlation between fullness of the Spirit and drinking wine:

"And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;" (Ephesians 5:18)

Christians will not lose their salvation by doing anything, including getting drunk; but, drinking will severely hinder your ability to be used of God.

The fact that John the Baptist would be filled with the Spirit from the womb indicates that he would be completely set apart for God his entire life.

People today receive the Holy Spirit when they are saved:

"Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (John 3:5)

"If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you." (John 14:15-17)

"In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise," (Ephesians 1:13)

Believers can also be filled with the Spirit as they yield themselves to the work of the Holy Spirit within them.

Practical Point – If you want to be filled with the Spirit, you have to be completely yielded to God and His Word.

III A Grievous Mistake (vs. 18 – 25)

Zacharias' mistake was that he asked for a sign. The angel tells him that because of his unbelief, the sign that he would receive would be his inability to speak. Of course, the next sign would be that his very old wife would become pregnant.

After Zacharias course was completed, he went to his own home, which was probably in the hill country surrounding Jerusalem. (see v. 39)

Practical Point - Notice that she hid herself. Why do people hide the "good news" We should shout and praise the Lord when we God works like this in our lives.

Though Zacharias could not speak, Elizabeth could have proclaimed to the world:

*"Ah Lord GOD! behold, thou hast made the heaven and the earth by thy great power and stretched out arm, **and there is nothing too hard for thee.**"* (Jeremiah 32:17)