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Luke 1:1 - 1:25



Gospel of Luke - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg discusses the first 25 verses of Luke chapter 1, emphasizing the importance of understanding the context of the Gospel. Gregg reminds listeners that though Luke parallels Mark and Matthew, it does not mean that Luke's account is less accurate. He underscores the significance of the prophecy of the birth of John the Baptist and the appearance of the angel of the Lord, who announced the impending birth of Elizabeth's son to Zechariah, who would later become John's father. Finally, Gregg offers some insights into the question of why Zechariah was made mute as a result of his encounter with the angel.

Transcript

We're turning now to Luke chapter 1, beginning our verse-by-verse teaching through the book. I want to say that we have a limited number of sessions to cover a long book. The book is 24 chapters and we have only a few more than that number of sessions.

And as you can see, simply by looking at chapter 1, some of these chapters are long. We've got 80 verses in chapter 1. That's like two chapters of ordinary books. So it's a real challenge we're going to face in getting through Luke in the number of sessions available.

Because of that, I'll just announce in advance what I intend to do. I want to focus most of my commentary on those parts of Luke that are not in the other Gospels, of which there's a significant amount. The parts of Luke that are parallel to other Gospels, I will not omit, I will not overlook, but I won't go into detail on them because I have done so in Matthew and in Mark, and of course we have those lectures available.

So that anything that's found in the other Gospels, I will assume we have taken some time in developing. And even when I teach the other Gospels, where there are parallels in Luke, I always bring out what Luke has said that may not be in Mark or Matthew. I always teach that way.

So whatever is common material to all three synoptics, or maybe even to two of them, I will spend less time expounding on than those things which are unique to Luke. That's

just what we're going to have to do. Now the first two chapters of Luke are unique to Luke, so we can't scrimp on those very much, but we do need to even measure our time.

I say our, that's an editorial we. I have to measure my time. You don't have to do any measuring because you'll just sit there until I'm done, but I have to get through the material and that's going to be my challenge.

All right, so let's look at Luke chapter 1. Let's read verses 1 through 4 to begin. Luke says, Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which are most surely believed among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed. Now these four verses are usually called the prologue to Luke.

It's not obviously telling the story yet. The story begins in verse 5. These verses are setting us up to know why we should pay any attention to what follows. Why should we read what Luke has to say on this subject? As he admits, many others have already written up some of this material.

Many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of these things. So if so, then why do we want to bother with this particular narrative? Well, he is not really making any specific criticism of the earlier narratives, but he apparently thinks they were not adequate. He doesn't say they weren't adequate, but obviously he admits that there have been many before, but he's going to go ahead and do another one.

And his qualifications, he says, are that he has had perfect understanding of all things from the very first. Now that phrase, had perfect understanding of, a long phrase in the New King James, actually literally is translated, accurately followed. Two words will do it.

So he says that, it seemed good to me also having accurately followed all things from the very first. This doesn't mean that Luke was around in these early days that he's recording, but he has learned accurately the events that have occurred from the very beginning. This information that he has, for example, about the angel appearing to Zacharias, and the birth of John, and of Jesus, and so forth.

He got that from accurate sources. He mentions, in verse 2, people who were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word. The expression ministers of the word is not found anywhere else in the scripture.

The word ministers means servants. So they're called servants of the word. Actually, I believe the Plymouth Brethren refer to their, the people who address their congregation as servants of the word because they don't have clergy in that movement.

I think they refer to whoever's speaking in the church as the servant of the word. And this is a phrase taken from here. And it's the only place in the Bible it's found.

But what it actually means is not 100% sure because he could be making a distinction between eyewitnesses on one hand and servants of the word on the other. Or he might be saying that the same people are eyewitnesses and servants of the word. That is to say, obviously the information he has comes from eyewitnesses.

There are also people who are called servants of the word. They may be the same people, the eyewitnesses, or they may be another group who were not eyewitnesses but who were entrusted by the eyewitnesses with the task of passing along the word. You know, not everyone could be there to hear and see the things that happened, but those who did found faithful men who could pass it along.

Just like Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2, the things you've heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, the same commit thou to others who in turn will teach others. So that the idea is that those who knew firsthand would select certain persons no doubt to train and to commit the next generation of transmission of the information to. So it is possible that the eyewitnesses are one group and servants of the word are sort of the next generation of speakers about it and that we have information from both sources.

The other possibility, and really choosing between this isn't extremely crucial, but you should realize that he could be saying, there are people I got this information from who are themselves eyewitnesses and servants of the word. That is, not everyone who saw and heard what Jesus did ended up being professional preachers, or professional is the wrong word, but let's say career preachers. That thousands of people heard Jesus speak.

What Jesus did, he didn't do in a corner. He did it all in public and there are lots of people who are eyewitnesses who were not themselves ministers of the word. But Jesus selected some of his eyewitnesses to be ministers of the word, particularly his apostles.

Luke was not one of those, but some of his friends were. Certainly Paul was, but Paul even had most of his information about the historical date of Christ's life probably at second hand. Paul argues in his letters that he had it first hand by revelation of Christ, his knowledge of the gospel.

But that doesn't mean the gospel accounts that we're reading here. His understanding of what the gospel is, Paul got by direct revelation. Information about what Jesus said and did on different days of his lifetime probably were not revealed to Paul specifically, and were probably received by Paul through his communication with others who were eyewitnesses, and Luke with Paul would have heard these things.

Luke traveling with Paul spent much time in the presence of the other apostles. He also

had whatever written accounts he alludes to here. Many feel that Mark and Matthew may be among those many written accounts that Luke alludes to, so that he could have had access to Mark and Matthew.

We don't know that he did because he might be referring to written accounts that have not survived and we have no clue who wrote them or what they were. In any case, what Luke does suggest is that his knowledge of the subject is comprehensive, that he has certainly reliable witnesses. Now, this prologue to Luke really should make us think maybe a second time about what we mean when we speak of the inspiration of scripture.

Not that we should doubt that the scriptures are inspired, but we do have our own evangelical traditions after all. We sometimes think that the way that conservative Christians think in our era, in our part of the world, is the way conservative Christians always have thought. And I was raised certainly in an American evangelical tradition that taught something called plenary inspiration of scripture and inerrancy of scripture.

Now, these words are not found in scripture itself. So, in other words, while many people will judge you as a legitimate evangelical or not, based on what you give answers to their question, do you believe in the plenary inspiration of scripture, do you believe in the inerrancy of scripture, they're speaking as if scripture is the final authority, but they're using words that aren't found in scripture. How do I know if there's plenary inspiration? The Bible doesn't say.

How do I know if the scriptures are inerrant? They don't say. What they do say is that they're accurate. And isn't that good enough? Do I have to have a theory about how supernatural origin there was behind Luke's writing or Matthew's or Mark's writing in order to trust what they have to say? If we're either reading what eyewitnesses said happened and these are reliable men who've written with peer review from other people who knew the material, as far as I'm concerned, I don't have to have any kind of specific theory about the inerrancy or the plenary inspiration of Luke in order to trust him.

He doesn't claim those things about himself. And it's interesting because in verses 1 through 4, he is actually giving his reader reasons why they should trust what he has to say. Now, if he had said, and by the way, in addition to all this research, this supernatural thing is happening to me and I'm getting this revelation and I'm now operating in a supernatural realm as I put pen to paper.

And this is an inspirational thing happening to me right now. So you should really trust me because what I'm writing are the literal inerrant words of God. Now, Luke may have thought such things, but if he did, we have been given no information about it.

He doesn't claim that. And when he's trying to plead for his own credibility and why people should take seriously what he has to write and trust what he has to say, he skips over any reference to inspiration as if he either didn't know of any or didn't think that

was the basis for his credibility. The basis for his credibility was his research.

He was an accurate historian. And by the way, Luke's other writing and acts, as well as Luke, scholars have often marveled at how careful and responsible a historian Luke was. Luke has been challenged many times by skeptics as to things he said about historical people, even historical events and historical titles of Roman officials and so forth.

And again and again, it has been proven that Luke was correct. I mean, one example of a very large number is that in the Book of Acts, Luke mentioned that the rulers of the city of Thessalonica were called Politarchs. Well, the term Politarch for many years was unknown from anywhere except the Book of Acts.

And scholars thought he was mistaken by calling them Politarchs. But then they found like 16 or 18 inscriptions from Thessalonica which mentioned the leaders of the city and calls them Politarchs. And nobody but Luke had remembered or recorded for a long time that information.

Same thing happens with a great number of details in Luke's writing. And almost all objective scholars have actually said, you know, Luke's accuracy as a historian, regardless of any idea of inspiration, is as good as that of any ancient historian, better than most. He's earned credibility in that domain.

And there have actually been people like Sir William Ramsey who was a doubter about the inspiration of Acts but came to believe that it was totally reliable just from his archaeological studies, of which he was an expert, and found that, you know, Luke was right about just about everything that he ever claimed about historical things that could be documented. So that's all that Luke is really claiming about himself. I've got the information right.

I've done the kind of research that needs to be done. My sources are of an impeccable variety. And you can trust what I have to say.

Now, if there's another layer of credibility added by some unspoken inspiration, and plenary, you know, inspiration or something like that, Luke does not seem to know about it, or if he did know about it, he didn't seem to think it was worth mentioning. So it may raise questions as to whether we're supposed to impose on the Scripture certain theories about inspiration that they don't claim for themselves. To my mind, by the way, I have no problem.

If someone wants to say it's plenary-inspired, fine. You can hold that view. I just don't... I would want the Bible to tell me that, not some theologian.

And the interesting thing is that we criticize the Roman Catholics because, out of their reverence for Mary, they say all kinds of unscriptural things about her, like she never sinned, she didn't... you know, she was assumed into heaven, and things like that. And

we say, well, that's unbiblical doctrine. We understand that Catholics appreciate Mary, but you shouldn't be making up extra-biblical things just because you respect her.

But evangelicals may end up doing the same thing about the Bible. We know the Bible's, you know, sacred. The Bible is God's communication to us.

But that doesn't entitle us to make up things about the Bible that the Bible doesn't say about itself. So in reading Luke's Gospels, we have to remember this, by the way. The individual books of the Bible were not all collected for a long time after they were written.

These were individually written books. It's entirely possible to say that, well, the book of Revelation, that's directly inspired by God, because, I mean, it's visions from God that John had on Pamos. How could that not be, you know, directly inspired stuff? But to take another book by another author who doesn't make any such claims about himself, and take him at his own word.

Why not take him on his own terms? I have no problem with that. And I really think that some people stumble because, you know, they take the traditional evangelical idea that every word in the Bible, just because it's in between the leather covers, was inspired in a way that sometimes the authors never dreamed of claiming that they were. None of the Gospel writers claimed they were inspired.

They might have been. And if you want to tell me they were, I'm not going to argue against it. I don't, you know, to me, that doesn't seem to have been the issue to them.

The issue was, can you rely on what they're saying? And many people I know, I rely on what they're saying, even though I don't count them inspired. If they're honest, if they're competent, it's good enough for me. If unbeknownst to me and unbeknownst to them, they also are inspired, well, that's all the better, but how am I supposed to know if I'm not told, except by some theologian who tells me I'm supposed to believe that.

I believe everything in Luke is true. I believe everything in the New Testament is true. I believe it's all reliable.

But believing all that does not require me to believe things that aren't stated in it about itself. So, I believe that some American evangelicalism has defined itself by terms just as extra-biblical, extra-biblical claims about the Bible, just like the Roman Catholics make extra-biblical claims about Mary. Mary's a holy lady, and the Bible's a holy book, but that doesn't entitle us to make up stuff about it that its own authors don't affirm.

At least that's my own crazy way of thinking. So, I take Luke as telling me here exactly why I should trust what he has to say, and I believe him. I believe he had thorough knowledge of the subject, reliable witnesses, and what more do you need from a history book? And that's what this is.

It's a book of the history of Jesus. And he said in verse 4 that he said all those things in verses 1 through 3 to say so that you may know the certainty of those things which were in which you were instructed. So, Theophilus apparently had received some previous instruction, but Luke wanted to make sure that he had a good, solid source that could guarantee that what he'd heard before was true.

So, this is it. The book of Luke is what he's providing for that purpose, and we should therefore assume that we can be certain that these things are true because we have such a good witness, and others besides, of course. We have Matthew, Mark, and John, and so forth.

But so much for the prologue. The story actually begins with him setting the scene in verse 5 and following. I'm going to read several verses at a time, and then stop and go back and make comments about them.

Verse 5, There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blameless.

But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. Now, this sets up our main characters for the first section of the chapter. We're told about Zacharias and Elizabeth.

He was a priest. He was not a high priest, by the way. I've heard preachers mistakenly say that John the Baptist's father was a high priest.

We have to understand, in the Jewish priesthood, there were thousands of priests, and only one high priest was supposed to be. There happened to be two high priests at this particular time, Annas and Caiaphas, but that was a violation of the Law of Moses, an arrangement that came about because of the tension between Roman appointments and Jewish understanding. That's another issue we can talk about some other time.

But the way God had set things up, there was one high priest at a time, and eventually thousands of regular priests. All of them were descended from Aaron, the priest and the high priest. It's just that the high priest was the oldest son of the previous oldest son of the previous oldest son of the family, supposedly.

That's how it was supposed to work out. That hereditary priesthood kind of got interrupted during the intertestamental period when the priesthood was given to the highest bidder by Antiochus Epiphanes, and there was one priest after another that weren't even related to each other, and so forth. The way things God set them up in the days of Moses and Aaron got confused and changed.

Even Eli, who was a legitimate priest in his day, in the days of Samuel, was rejected from

the priesthood, and the priesthood was come up from a different line than his, from Zadok, and so forth. So there wasn't an unbroken hereditary line of high priests as there was supposed to be, but the system was still in place. Now, Zacharias was not the high priest, but he was one of the priests, by this time there were thousands of priests.

The priesthood had been instituted 1400 years earlier or so, and you know, in many generations the two sons of Aaron had had many children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, so that by the time of David, even a thousand years before Jesus, there were so many priests that they couldn't all minister at the same time. The tabernacle just wasn't big enough and didn't have enough work for them all to do. So David divided the priesthood into 24 courses, as they were called, and each of these 24 courses served the temple at a different time of the year.

They actually would have, each of these 24 courses would have two weeks a year. I don't believe those weeks were conjoined, I think there would be one week at one point of the year and another week at a later point of the year that each of the 24 courses would have responsibility for burning the incense and offering sacrifices and so forth at the temple. Now, one of the greatest privileges of a priest was to go into the holy place, not the Holy of Holies, just the holy place where they could go every day.

And there was the lampstand and the showbread and the golden altar of incense and incense would be burned twice a day in the holy place. Now, going actually into the holy places, most priests didn't go in there most of the time. It would be crowded if there were many in there, so they needed only one priest each time to burn the incense.

They had three times a day that the Israelites would gather at the temple for prayer and the first and the third of these three coincided with the burning of the incense in the morning and the evening, with the evening and morning sacrifices. Now, each course as I said, a priest got two weeks a year, but they still had to decide who's going to have the privilege of burning incense, because only one priest even in the group could do that. So they actually cast lots for that privilege.

So if you were of the course of a like Zacharias was, when it was their week, they would cast lots to say who's going to go in and burn the incense, a great privilege. Such a great privilege you could only do it one week in your lifetime. And if you were chosen by lot to be the one to do that, then you would for the whole week go in and burn incense and then you would never do it again, because in all the later casting of lots you were excluded from consideration.

You've had your turn. Someone else needs to have a turn. So we're told, actually we haven't read the verse yet, but in verse 9 it says, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

So this priest was privileged on this occasion for the only time in his whole life to go into

the temple and burn incense like this. He was an old man and his wife was an old woman and she had been barren. It reminds us of Sarah and Abraham somewhat, and I think it's supposed to.

And these were very holy people. Not only was Zacharias descended from Aaron, but his wife was of the daughters of Aaron also, we're told. Now, it was not required that a priest marry someone from a priestly family or even another, Levite.

A priest could marry someone who was not a Levite, I think, but for the most part, to marry a daughter of Aaron would really be in this meaning, of course, a great descendant of Aaron. This was a great privilege, a very special, pure family, priestly family. And that being so, we have John the Baptist, since these are his parents, coming from a priestly family and himself being of priestly birth.

Now, he, John the Baptist, as it turns out, never served as a priest because he was called to be a prophet. In just about the same year, he would have served as a priest because he would have begun to be a priest at age 30, and that appears to be about the time he began his prophetic ministry. In that respect, John the Baptist was not different from quite a few others in the Old Testament.

In fact, our prophet Jeremiah was a priest, though he seems to have started his ministry before he was 30, as a he had never probably served as a priest, but he was of the priestly line, and he was called to be a prophet when he was a young man. But the prophet Zechariah, in the Old Testament, actually two different Zechariahs. By the way, Zecharias is simply a Greek form of Zechariah.

You've got 36 guys in the Bible named Zechariah, and this is one of them. But two of the other Zechariahs in the Bible were also priests and prophets. One was the son of Jehoiada, a priest, and then the one who wrote the book of Zechariah, Zechariah the son of Barakiah, he was also a priest, and both of them were called to be prophets.

Most prophets were not priests, but obviously some of them were. God sometimes would call a priest since he already held a religious title in Israel, would also speak prophetically through him, and so this was the case with this one, and especially of his son John. Of Zechariah and Elizabeth, we are told something that we are not told about very many people in the Bible.

In verse 6, it says, they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blameless. Now, this, of course, raises questions about some other traditional doctrines of ours, like the idea that the law cannot be kept. It's very commonly said among some evangelicals, it's impossible to keep the law.

Really? Then how did they do it? There's also the belief that people who are not

regenerated really can't do anything righteous. This is, of course, the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, that if you're not regenerated, you can't be a righteous person, but these people were righteous before, I think, before the Bible speaks about regeneration. I believe regeneration is a phenomenon we experience since the resurrection of Christ, and I don't think Old Testament people experienced regeneration like we do, and yet there were Old Testament people who obeyed the law, who were blameless.

Job lived before the law was given, so technically he didn't keep the law of Moses, but he was blameless and righteous before God, and so were these people. The Bible speaks of people who were good people, and sometimes this almost seems sacrilegious to speak of people being good people, because we're supposed to believe that all sinners are so wicked that they can hardly be any worse. Now, what I just said just now is more of a caricature of Calvinism.

They don't say they couldn't be worse, but they can't be good, and in this case, we read of an exception. Certainly, they weren't the only exception. There was Simeon in the temple, no doubt a godly man.

Anna in the temple we'll read about later on, and she certainly was a righteous woman. She spent her whole life in the temple praying and fasting. How could that not be good? We have to realize that the Bible doesn't always support all our evangelical traditions.

There are people who are good, and there were people who were good even before Jesus was born. Now, if we are committed to certain theological paradigms, we can say, well, they obviously were the elect. They were regenerated just like we are, and that's why they could be good, but doing that is a convenience for certain theologies.

That's not really stated in Scripture, and it seems to go against Scripture to my mind, because Peter said in 1 Peter chapter 3 that we are born again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. So, if rebirth is a phenomenon that is made possible through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, I don't know that we could really say with certainty that people were regenerated before Jesus rose from the dead. These were just people who had to make a choice.

Will I serve God or will I not serve God? In Israel, there was a faithful remnant in every generation, and what we're being told here is that John's parents were of that faithful remnant in their generation. There must have been very few, because Israel is very corrupt at this time, and we can see John and Jesus calling the whole nation, saying they have to repent, but there were some who were of that remnant, and John's parents were definitely among them. Now, it says in verse 8, Now it was so, excuse me, so it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, so it was that week for his division of Abbiah that he was a part of, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. Remember I said there were three times a day Israel gathered at the temple, at least those who wished to, and prayed, and two of those times were at the hour of incense, one in the morning and one in the evening. And so incense is being offered up at the same time as corporate prayer.

This may be a custom of Israel that informed the picture and revelation of the elders offering up incense from the golden altar in heaven, and the incense is the prayers of the saints. We read of this in chapter 5 and in chapter 8 of Revelation, that the incense that's offered up in heaven by these heavenly officiants, it corresponds to prayer. Incense is an image of prayer, and so in this ritual of Israel, so also they're praying at the time that the incense is offered.

One of the Psalms says, may my prayer ascend unto you like incense. So even in the Old Testament, this connection was made between the ritual of offering incense and the phenomenon of prayer. It represents our prayers going up before God as a sweet smelling aroma to Him, indicating that He actually likes us to pray.

It's not an imposition on Him when we pray. It's a pleasant and sweet thing to Him when we pray. Why does God want us to pray? He likes it.

Why does He like it? I think He likes it because when we pray we're admitting our dependence upon Him. It's a humbling thing to do, to have to ask for help. And humility is a pleasant thing to Him as well, I think.

Verse 11, Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zechariah saw him, he was troubled and fear fell upon him. And the angel said to him, do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you should call his name John.

And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

He will also go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 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. And Zechariah said to the angel, How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years. And the angel answered and said to him, I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you, and to bring you these glad tidings.

Behold, you will be mute, and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their own time. And the

people waited for Zechariah, because he was actually inside the temple when all this happened, and they marveled that he lingered so long in the temple, but when he came out, which is when they expect him to kind of raise his arms and utter a blessing of dismissal to the people of Israel, he didn't do that, he couldn't talk. It says, when he came out, he could not speak to them, and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless.

And so it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house. Now after those days, his wife Elizabeth conceived, and she hid herself five months, saying, Thus the Lord has dealt with me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men. Okay, let's talk about this whole section.

It was the week, or one of the weeks, when the course of Abbaiah was to serve in the priesthood. The lot fell on Zechariah, so it was his privilege, his once-in-a-lifetime privilege, to go into the temple and burn incense every day that week, even after he was struck mute. It says in verse 23, and so it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, he departed to his own house.

So he still finished out the week, though he couldn't talk. He was in there praying, and an angel, as it turns out, Gabriel, appeared to him. This is the same angel that would later appear to Mary, and of course made this announcement.

The first thing the angel said was what angels always say first, don't be afraid. Apparently the first impulse of anyone who sees an angel is to be afraid. Now I know some charismatics who order angels around like they were their servants, but if you actually really saw an angel, you'd probably be afraid, not cocky, not bossy.

And when people claim they've seen angels and they don't claim that they were afraid, I really wonder what was wrong with them, that they weren't afraid when they saw an angel, because every time an angel appears, the first thing it says to someone is don't be afraid. Apparently that's a necessary encouragement they have to give before they give their other message. And then he said, Zechariah, your prayer has been heard.

Now, he says, your wife's going to have a son, so we might assume that it means your prayer for a son. We could certainly assume that Zechariah and Elizabeth being godly people and childless would have been praying for a son, since the priest needs to pass down his priestly line through a son. And, you know, to have no child is a reproach.

As Elizabeth says in verse 25, by her becoming pregnant, the Lord has taken away her reproach from among men. It's a reproach, it's an embarrassment to a woman not to be able to give a son to her husband, especially if he's a priest. You need male priests and you need sons from the priesthood for that.

And Zechariah and Elizabeth had not been able to supply such, and no doubt they had

prayed for a son. This question, though, that we would ask is, if it is referring to prayer for a son, were they indeed still praying for a son? They were too old to have children. If she'd been barren all her life and now she's of great age, would they still have been praying for a son at this point? Or, could it be that they had prayed in their younger years for a son and had given up, but their prayer was still heard and answered at a later date, like this? Even after they had, perhaps, given up on their hopes of having a son, which, it seems from Zechariah's response, he didn't have much hope of it, even when an angel told him it was going to happen.

He didn't really necessarily think that was very realistic. And so, it would seem unlikely that they were praying, or at least praying with faith, that they'd have a son at this advanced age when people don't have children anymore and they'd never been able to when they're young. So, it may mean that the prayers you prayed many years ago, which you no longer pray, have been stored up, and God has remembered them, and this is just the time that He's decided to answer them, when all hope has been lost of them being answered.

It's interesting how that is, you know, when Mary and Martha sent message to Jesus saying, the one who you love is sick, meaning their brother Lazarus, and Jesus didn't go. And then, when He did go, Lazarus had died, and Mary and Martha both said when they met Him, if You had been here, my brother would have been well, would have been healed. But, of course, by implication, too late now.

We're not expecting anything now, of course. Although, Martha did say, I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask, and it's not clear exactly if she was expressing real faith that He'd raised Lazarus or not, but the idea is we had some hope at one point that You might have come and healed them, and look, You waited too long. We're past that point now, He's dead.

But, it wasn't too late, because really, it's never too late for God. And likewise, with Elizabeth and Zacharias, they no doubt felt it was too late, but obviously it wasn't too late for God, and so their prayer has been heard, and now, much belatedly, it's going to be answered. That is assuming that the prayer that the angel refers to is His prayer for a son.

In the context, it kind of looks like that's what He's saying. Your prayer's been heard, and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son. On the other hand, Zacharias, the priest, was praying in the temple when this happened.

This was his job. This was his ministry. He was in there praying for the redemption of Israel.

This is what the priests were to pray for, that God would send redemption to Israel. And the angel could mean, this prayer you were just praying just now, believe it or not, it's

going to happen now. Your wife's going to have a son, and there's more to come besides that, and this is the time when the redemption of Israel is going to come.

And so, it's possible that He's not even referring to a prayer for a son, but the prayer that He prayed as a priest for the nation and for the redemption of Israel, because certainly, the information the angel had given was setting in motion those things that were to bring about in very short order the redemption that God had promised. It's not clear whether it's the prayer for a son or the prayer for redemption, because actually, the announcement that His wife was going to have a son is really the beginning of the story of the redemption of Israel, too. So, He might have made reference to that regardless which prayer was in view.

And I'd like to be able to tell you which one it is, but I don't really know that I can say with certainty, nor that I need to. And He says in verse 14, well, verse 13 says you're going to name Him John, and you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at His birth, for He will be great in the sight of the Lord. Now, there's many people who are great, men, but this one's great in the sight of the Lord.

Likewise, the parents of John, it said they were both righteous before God, in verse 6. Lots of people, the Pharisees were righteous before men, but these people were righteous in the sight of God. God looks on the heart, man looks on the outward appearance, so this family, John the Baptist and his parents, they were not like others who were merely thought to be righteous or thought to be great. They were truly righteous in the sight of God, and He would be truly great in God's estimation, and of great importance.

Jesus Himself later would say about John that of those born of women there has risen none greater than John the Baptist. So that's Jesus' assessment of Him, and certainly He is therefore great in the sight of the Lord. It says, He shall drink neither wine nor strong drink, which is probably a reference to Him being a Nazarite.

We have many Baptists who don't drink wine or strong drink today, but that's not unusual for Baptists. That's unusual for Jews, though. The Jews didn't avoid wine or strong drink.

There was no reason to. They actually needed it, because their water wasn't good, and they had to mix it with the water to make their water safe to drink. So real wine, not grape juice, real wine was at every table in every Jewish home, and everyone put it in their water to make it safe.

However, Nazarites didn't drink it. Nazarites, as Numbers chapter 6 tells us, had three restrictions. In most cases, these were self-imposed.

Most Nazarites were adults who decided to take a vow of a Nazarite. During the time of

their vow, there were three restrictions they placed upon themselves. One was they wouldn't touch anything produced by the grapevine.

Not only wine, but grape juice, raisins, grapes themselves were not eaten by a Nazarite. Also, a Nazarite would never cut his hair during the time of his vow. His vow could be as short as a month, or it could be a lifetime.

Therefore, his hair might not get very long during that time, but it'd be longer than otherwise, because he wouldn't cut it. Or it might get very long, because he might be a Nazarite for life. But the avoidance of anything from the grapevine is one of the conditions of the Nazarite vow in chapter 6 of Numbers.

The no cutting of the hair for that period of time, and then also having no contact with a dead body. Even if, you know, a friend of yours or a relative dies while you're having your vow, you can't have any contact with them. You can't bury them, for example.

Someone else is going to have to do that. So, saying that he will not drink wine or strong drink is probably shorthand for saying he'll be a Nazarite. Probably these other restrictions of a Nazarite are implied as well.

And as I said, while the normal Nazarite was an adult who voluntarily took a vow, there are a few people in the Bible of whom it is said that they were called to be Nazarites from the womb. That is, their parents made the decision for them. Actually, God did, and the parents enforced it.

Samson is the most famous of these, of course. He's famous for his long hair. He's not famous for keeping the vow very well, however.

Cutting his hair was the last provision that he broke. Touching dead bodies was fairly commonplace for him, and even touching the wrong women's bodies, too, for that matter. He also probably drank.

We have no evidence that he avoided grapes or whatever. He was not a very faithful Nazarite, but he never made the decision. It was decided for him before he was born.

Samuel, likewise, was apparently a Nazarite from birth. When Hannah prayed for a son, she told the Lord that he would be a Nazarite if the Lord would give her a son, he'd be a Nazarite all his life. John the Baptist is another one.

Elijah probably was, too. We don't know much about Elijah's background, but he is described one time in the Bible as a hairy man. It may be speaking of... Esau was a hairy man in a different sense.

He had body hair all over him. Some feel that Elijah was a Nazarite, and that would make sense if John, a Nazarite, is coming in the spirit and power of Elijah. They may have had

that in common, as well, being Nazarites.

The Nazarite vow was really just a vow of separation from the world, separation from society in general. Not isolation, not monkish hermitage, but rather inward separation, defining one's role in the world as being devoted to God in a way that in ordinary life you would not be. You avoid these very commonplace things that other people do, like drink wine at the table or cut their hair and do things like that.

The idea is you're avoiding certain things that normal people would do, because in your own mind, you've taken a vow to not be like a normal person, but to be unusually devoted to God. The angel announces that John would be this from the birth. And more than that, and more important than that, he will also be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb.

Now, filled with the Holy Spirit is a term that we use in the New Testament of Christians. But we are told in John's gospel, in John 7, 39, that when Jesus was on earth, the Holy Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. Which is interesting, because before Jesus was glorified, the Holy Spirit seemed active, not only in John the Baptist and Jesus, and I think even in the Apostles at times, but also in the Old Testament.

The prophets spoke by the Holy Spirit. Even Samson's supernatural feats were done by the Holy Spirit. As soon as the Spirit came upon him, he killed a lion with his hands.

His strength was supernatural, not natural. The Holy Spirit would come upon people and enable them to prophesy or do something else that people can't normally do, even in the Old Testament. So, obviously, when John tells us, in John 7, 39, that the Holy Spirit was not yet given in the lifetime of Jesus because he had not yet been glorified, John is speaking of a specific phenomenon of regeneration where the Holy Spirit comes to live permanently inside of every believer.

And we become the temple and the habitation of God, of the Holy Spirit. That's a New Testament phenomenon since the day of Pentecost. But in the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit came upon people and even filled people momentarily for some task.

And we read of those expressions in the Old Testament. So, to say John was filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb doesn't mean that from the time he was conceived, he was filled with the Spirit constantly for the rest of his life until he died. He had his low points, too.

He had his times of doubt, even. But he, like prophets in the Old Testament, would be filled with the Spirit probably periodically, from time to time, when he would prophesy or whatever. It's probably how we're to understand it.

And this began even for the first time when he was in his mother's womb. And then such

occurrences happened throughout the rest of his life. The time it happened in his mother's womb apparently is when Mary came and visited Elizabeth.

And we read that the baby John in the womb jumped for joy, leapt for joy in the womb. And it says that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. So, I think this filling of his mother with the Holy Spirit and him leaping for joy is no doubt supposed to be recognized as the fulfillment of this prediction that John would be filled with the Spirit from the womb.

But not necessarily every moment, forever after. John didn't have the privilege of living into the New Covenant era. In fact, Jesus made a point of that by saying, there's not a risen one born among women greater than John the Baptist, but whoever is the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

That is, we who are in the kingdom have a greater privilege and status, in a sense, than John who only could predict the kingdom, but he died before its full realization. So, John's an Old Testament character. Yeah, we're reading about him in the New Testament, but he's still living under the Old Covenant.

He died before the New Covenant was instituted in the Upper Room. Jesus instituted the New Covenant in the Upper Room with his disciples at the Last Supper. John was dead by then.

So, John lived his entire lifetime under the Old Covenant and was the last of the Old Testament prophets. It says of him, in verse 16, he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah 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.

John's mission was to prepare people for Jesus, to be a forerunner, and to get them thinking the right way about their sins and about God. The nation had become, I guess, rather apathetic about the things of God and very compromised. Even the most prominent leaders, the Pharisees and the chief priests, were very wicked people internally in their hearts.

As the spiritual leaders were, not many of the average people rose above that level. So, the nation was not ready for the Messiah. They had to be prepped.

They had to be primed for his message so they could respond to him properly. So, John, a prophet of the Old Testament sort, was sent to prepare a people. Notice it doesn't just say to prepare people, like so many individuals, but a people.

A group of people, a specific remnant would be prepared through his ministry for Jesus to show up, and that's what his ministry was. When John was asked why he was baptizing in the Gospel of John, chapter 1, he said, well, I'm the voice of one crying in the wilderness,

prepare the way of the Lord. And, of course, he's quoting from Isaiah 4, verses, I think around verse 6 or so.

Isaiah 40, I said 4, but it's Isaiah 40, I think it's verses 4 through 6, if I'm not mistaken. But, also, it is quoted from Malachi, chapter 3, verse 1, that John was a messenger sent before his face, and even Luke quotes that scripture. He also quotes the Isaiah 40 passage in Luke 3 when it begins to discuss John's ministry.

We don't have direct quotations of these Old Testament references to John in the birth narrative, but we do later on in the description of John's ministry. But we do have here an allusion to an Old Testament text where it says, he'll come in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children. Now, that part, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, is a direct quote from Malachi.

The last verses of the Old Testament, the last two verses in the Old Testament, Malachi, chapter 4, verses 5 and 6, predict that God would send Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord. Now, that great and terrible day of the Lord was to be the destruction of the nation of Israel in Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. And before that would happen, God would not send that judgment without first giving Israel a chance to repent.

He said, I will send Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord, and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children. And then he says, and the hearts of the children to the fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a curse. So, John was sort of the last warning before the Messiah and before judgment.

The coming of Messiah was going to be on one hand, the offering of redemption to Israel, but it would only be to the remnant of Israel, the people who were prepared for the Lord that John was preparing. The rest of Israel was going to be facing judgment. Not only because of their rejection of Christ, but their rejection of all the prophets.

Jesus said that in Matthew 23, and it's also in Luke, that he said, all the blood of all the prophets from Abel to Zechariah whom you slew, shall come on this generation. And it's the punishment for all the unrighteous bloodshed, all the prophets that were killed by the Jews, even the Messiah. That guilt is accumulated now, and it's all going to come crashing down in that generation, Jesus said.

It's also in Luke 11 and Matthew 23. So, John was Elijah, who is to come. In fact, Jesus actually said that once on a different occasion later.

The disciples said, why would Elijah come? Why did the scribes say that Elijah is going to come? And Jesus said, Elijah did come. They did to him whatever they wanted to. If you can receive it, John is Elijah, he said.

Now, what they mean is this, that John was the fulfillment of the prediction about Elijah.

Many Christians, and certainly many Jews, still think Elijah, the Tishbite, is going to come back. The guy who went up in the flaming chariot in the whirlwind, that he is going to come back.

And at Passover, many times Jews set a place at the table for Elijah in case he happens to come back that night. They expect Elijah back. So do many Christians who think like Jews rather than like New Testament Christians.

They take the prophecy of Elijah literally, whereas the New Testament took it figuratively. The fulfillment of the prophecy about Elijah is in John. Jesus said so, and the angel said so.

The prophecy about Elijah is in Malachi, and it's there that it says he'll turn the hearts of the fathers to the children. The angel said John's coming in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children. So, in other words, he's saying Malachi's prediction is now going to be fulfilled in John.

Now, instead of finishing the quote in Malachi which says, and turn the hearts of the children to the fathers, the angel paraphrases, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, which might suggest that this strange statement about turning hearts of fathers to children and fathers to children and so forth, that fathers and children are being figuratively used. Those who are true spiritual leaders, the just, are the fathers. Those who are the children, the disobedient who need to be changed, they're the disobedient, they're the children.

And so fathers and children might be figures of speech because where Malachi says he's going to turn the hearts of the children to the fathers, the angel says he'll turn the disobedient, that's in the place of children, to the wisdom of the just, that's in the place of fathers. So it's, the meaning of this prophecy is difficult. Many people feel that it refers to actually reestablishing family relationships in the nuclear family in Israel.

But it's, if fathers is to be taken as actual fathers, it probably means ancestors. It probably means to realign this generation of Jews with the hearts of their ancestors who were more faithful and who loved God like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It's not entirely clear, but one thing that is clear, the wording is strange, but what is being said is that John is there to change the mood and the hearts of Israel to make them more the way they need to be to receive the Messiah, to prepare a people or make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

Now Zechariah's response in verse 18 is, how can I know this? For I'm an old man and my wife is well advanced in years. Now we know that the angel he said, well I'm Gabriel, I stand in the presence of God so I mean I should be credible, right? He says, and I was sent by God to speak to you these things, these good tidings. You should be happy about this, not raising questions like this about it.

And behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time. Now, we don't have much time here, but I just want to say something about this muteness of Zechariah. Many people say, why was he struck mute for his doubts when Mary expressed similar doubts before the chapter is over and God doesn't punish her at all? She says, how can this be? I haven't known a man.

And the angel instead of saying, don't talk that way, he says, well, he gives her an explanation. She doesn't suffer any consequences for her questioning. Why does Zechariah suffer consequences? One argument is given that he wasn't asking for an explanation.

He was doubting. Mary said, how can this be? How can I have a baby since I haven't known a man? How is this going to be pulled off? Just looking for more instructions. Whereas Zechariah said, how can I know that this is true? In other words, Zechariah is expressing some doubt.

Now, this is the explanation that is usually given to the question of why was Zechariah punished and Mary wasn't when they both expressed their questions about this. Usually it is said because Zechariah doubted and Mary didn't. But this isn't even a very good answer in my opinion.

Because both Abraham and Sarah doubted and even laughed in disbelief when God himself, not an angel, when God himself told them they are going to have a baby in their old age. They didn't just doubt. They almost mocked.

They laughed. Why weren't they punished? Why is Zechariah punished for this? It has occurred to me and I don't know if it has occurred to anyone else or not, but it has occurred to me that Zechariah was not punished. Being mute was not a punishment.

It was an accommodation to his question. How can I know this will happen? Well, I'll give you a sign. Here's a sign.

You won't be able to speak. From the moment you can't speak, you'll know I'm telling the truth and he's helping his unbelief. Not punishing him.

Many of the prophets had to have signs in their actions and in their lives that were part of their message. Think of all the things that Ezekiel had to go through. Was he being punished? No.

He was just a messenger of God and God had him do some very difficult things. Hosea had to marry a woman who was going to break his heart. He wasn't being punished for it.

The message that the prophet has sometimes has to be lived out or visually presented

with a sign. It's very possible that the muteness of Zechariah was a sign not a punishment. But what's it a sign of? And why would it be that? Why would he not be able to speak? Well, remember when John the Baptist was born and named, this muteness ended.

This long period of silence from Zechariah came to an end when John the Baptist was born. So did God's long period of prophetic silence. With the birth of John the Baptist, 400 years of silence was broken because Malachi had been the last prophet God had sent 400 years earlier and there had been a long silence from God.

And when John came, that broke that silence. When John came, it broke Zechariah's silence too. It's very possible that the muteness or the silence of Zechariah was meant as a sign.

He represented God. That's what priests represent after all. He represented God being silent for a long time.

But breaking his silence when John the Baptist comes. The long delayed prophet. And so it's possible that Zechariah is not, the angel is not mad at him.

Zechariah is having a little hard time with this. And so the angel says, you wonder how you can know this? Because you didn't believe, I'll give you a sign. You'll be mute for this period of time.

But you know what? It's possible the angel already intended to have that sign given without being asked. Because God didn't wait for Ezekiel to ask before he told him how to live out these signs. It may be the angel came with this part of the message yet unexpressed but planning to give it.

And because Zechariah said, well how can I know? He said, well it just so happens I've got a way to help you know. Because God's authorized me to have you be mute for a while. In fact, that's in the plan.

Because it's a sign of God's long silence being finally broken with the birth of another prophet, John the Baptist. And then what happened? When John was born, we'll find that Zechariah's prophesied. The spirit of prophecy was again in Israel.

And so, my own thoughts, and I don't know if anyone else has ever necessarily said this or thought this, is that this was not a punishment. The angel wasn't mad at Zechariah. I think it was probably just one of the many prophetic signs that we find in Scripture.

And it would be a sensible one too at that. And so, we read the sequel down to verse 25 that he finished out his task in the temple. He went home.

His wife got pregnant. She hid herself for five months. We're not told why.

Maybe she just wanted to contemplate the meaning of it all and didn't want to be disturbed. If people knew she was pregnant, they'd be coming with all kinds of questions. She wanted her privacy perhaps.

We're not told why she hid herself for five months. But then, if people asked her anything, she said, well, the Lord has dealt with me in the days when he looked upon me to take away my reproach among men. So, this was a blessing to her.

A childless Israelite is a sad and embarrassed thing. But her embarrassment and her shame was taken away through this event. Well, we're unable to finish this chapter in this session, so we're going to take a break.

We'll come back to it.