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Gabriel's Announcement



The Life and Teachings of Christ - Steve Gregg

In this presentation, Steve Gregg takes a detailed look at the Gospel of Luke's account of Gabriel's Announcement. He highlights the credibility and historical accuracy of Luke's narrative, detailing the miraculous births of John the Baptist and Jesus. He also explores the significance of John's arrival and the prophetic symbolism surrounding his birth, and the importance of Mary's piety and faith in accepting her role in God's plan. Ultimately, Gregg underscores the central importance of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ and its distinct theological meaning for Christianity.

Transcript

Let's turn now to Luke chapter 1. We've taken the opening verses of John, we've taken the opening verses of Matthew, and now we come to the opening verses of Luke. It was inevitable. We're trying to take all the Gospels in harmony, and we're taking each passage in its reasonable, logical sequence.

The opening verses of John told about the pre-existence of Christ prior to his coming to earth. The opening verses of Matthew gave us the genealogy of Christ, which was, of course, prior to Jesus' coming, but still later than his pre-existence. And now we have Luke, who begins pretty much telling about events just prior to the birth of Jesus, and that is, of course, the birth of John the Baptist.

First of all, let's look at the opening verses, verses 1 through 4. Now, we learn from this that Luke is writing to an individual whose name is Theophilus. Unless the name Theophilus simply be taken generically, the name Theophilus means lover of God. Some have suggested that there was not an actual man by that name, but that Luke is simply addressing his letter generically to anybody who could describe himself as a lover of God, anybody who's a Theophilus.

However, that is, to my mind, not the most likely explanation. He, by the way, addresses his second work, the book of Acts, to the same man, Theophilus. There is a difference, though, because here, in verse 3, he addresses his reader as most excellent Theophilus, which suggests a title, possibly, of a Roman official.

Whereas, in the book of Acts, he simply says, O Theophilus, which is much more personal. He doesn't use a title. Some have suggested that when Luke wrote the book of Luke, Theophilus was not yet a Christian, but was a Roman official.

But by the time he wrote the book of Acts, the man had become a Christian so that Luke could dispense with the formalities and just say, O Theophilus, and not call him by his title, most excellent Theophilus. We know that Paul addressed Festus in the same way, and Agrippa, most excellent, was sort of a way of addressing a Roman officer. Some have felt that Luke and Acts were written in order to defend Paul as he was awaiting trial before the Roman emperor.

This, of course, is very much a side matter in our studies of the life of Christ. But since Luke and Acts are, of course, two parts of one story by the same author, and since Acts brings us all the way up to the imprisonment of Paul, but closes with Paul still awaiting his trial, some have felt, and I think reasonably, that Luke and Acts were written prior to Paul's trial. And since Luke was obviously written before Acts, because Acts speaks about Luke as the first treatise, Luke and Acts may have both been written during Paul's imprisonment in Rome, which began around 60.

Actually, two years earlier, in 58, Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea. He later appealed to Caesar and was transported to Rome and spent at least two years in prison there waiting for his trial. So he spent at least four years in prison.

At any time during that time, Luke might have foreseen a need for a defense of Paul's conduct to be written to some influential Roman official who could possibly go to bat for Paul when he went to trial. Possibly to his defense attorney or somebody like that. There's many guesses, but nobody knows for sure who Theophilus was.

At any rate, he was the recipient of this letter. This gospel is, therefore, an epistle of sorts, just like most of the books of the New Testament are. In fact, it has been said that of the 27 books of our New Testament, 24 are epistles addressed to somebody.

That includes the book of Revelation, which is addressed to the seven churches of Asia, and it includes Luke and Acts, which are addressed to Theophilus. That would leave only Matthew, Mark, and John, which would not be in the category of epistles. Some would make a more narrow definition of epistles than that to exclude them, but the point here is that Luke wrote this and his subsequent work, the sequel, the book of Acts, to this gentleman named Theophilus, whom he addresses in a very formal tone when he writes Luke, but in a much less formal tone when he writes Acts, which, as I say, may suggest that they became brothers in the Lord in between time.

Possibly, as a result of reading Luke, Theophilus may have become a believer, or Luke may have simply become more acquainted with him in the meantime. At any rate, Luke tells us something about his purpose and his methods of writing his account. He does not

claim that he was an eyewitness to any of the things that he records, but he says that he had access to the accounts of eyewitnesses, it says, and ministers of the word who delivered them to us.

So, Luke claims that he got his information at second hand from men who were eyewitnesses. Almost certainly those eyewitnesses would have been the other apostles. Luke, traveling with Paul extensively, would have had many occasions to cross paths with the apostles, going to Jerusalem and so forth with Paul.

He would be issued right into the inner circle of the leadership of the church as Paul's physician and companion. Whether he really acted as a physician to Paul or not, we don't know, but we know Luke was a physician. And so, he would have had opportunities to meet Matthew and John, and probably Mark, who traveled with Peter, and maybe a great number of others.

Certainly all the apostles probably crossed his path, and he may have gathered information from all of them. In any case, he indicates that his gospel is the product of having paid careful attention to that which eyewitnesses had written down. In fact, so careful that he could say he had a perfect knowledge of all these things.

He says in verse 3, it seemed good to me also having had perfect understanding of all these things from the very beginning, from the very first. Which suggests that from the very beginning of the gospel story, Luke's knowledge of the events is comprehensive or complete. And he wrote this so that Theophilus, and perhaps other readers beside, would know the certainty of what was passed along to us or what was reported to us about Jesus.

Luke indicated that his account would contribute to the certainty of the historicity of the events. And we see that Luke is at pains to show how historical the things are. He usually gives some kind of a time frame, in some kind of verifiable way.

For instance, in verse 5 he says, there was in the days of Herod, which pinpoints a particular time period that these events took place. So if somebody wished to do further research, he could look for documents from that period, or interview people from that period, to see whether or not such events did occur. Likewise, in chapter 3 of Luke, verse 1, he says, now in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip the tetrarch of Aeturia, and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysannaues the tetrarch of Abilene, when Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias.

Now, he really wants to nail down this particular time period. It was the 15th year of the Caesar, and he gives evidence of knowledge of who was reigning in other surrounding regions at the time, and who were the high priests at the time. You can see that Luke is

at pains to make his work historically credible.

And he is historically credible, by the way. Scholars, especially of the last century who sought to tear apart the integrity of the gospel accounts, were always looking for faults with Luke's writing. They were continually trying to find errors that Luke had made.

And they accused him of errors frequently, but further discoveries so many times proved that Luke was correct in what he said. Including the discoveries in archaeology of many of the names of persons mentioned by Luke in the very regions where Luke said they were, usually rulers, whose names had not been found outside of the Book of Luke or of Acts prior to this century. But it's in the last several decades, actually, the early part of this century, that Luke has been vindicated and is now regarded to be one of the very best of the classical historians.

And Luke wanted to be regarded so. He wanted his reader to be able to be certain, or to know the certainty of those things in which he was instructed, namely the story of Jesus. So, with that introduction, and with a very credible witness as our source, we get into the historical record.

And Luke goes further back into the historical record than do the other gospels. Matthew, of course, does record the birth of Jesus, but he doesn't record the birth of John the Baptist, which was prior by six months. In fact, Luke doesn't only begin with the birth of John the Baptist, but with those things that transpired prior to the birth of John the Baptist.

Even when it comes to giving genealogies, Luke's genealogy goes back further than Matthew's. It goes all the way back to Adam, and even to God, before Adam. Whereas Matthew's only goes back so far as Abraham.

So Luke said he's had perfect knowledge or understanding of all things from the very first. And so he starts at the very first. He starts as early as he sees necessary to tell the story of Jesus.

And it's interesting that all four of the gospels agree that the first part of the story is John the Baptist. When John completes his prologue in the first 18 verses of his gospel, he immediately goes into, in verse 19, a discussion of John the Baptist's ministry. And John the Baptist is prominent up through chapter 3 of John.

Matthew, although he doesn't record the birth of John the Baptist, when it comes to telling of the ministry of Jesus, he first tells of the ministry of John the Baptist. So does Mark, and so does Luke. Luke actually goes so far as to tell about the birth of John the Baptist.

Very clearly, John the Baptist, the story of John the Baptist, is the beginning of the story of Jesus. John was born just six months before Jesus. He was probably a distant relative,

his parents being of the tribe of Levi, and Jesus' parents being of the tribe of Judah.

There apparently was some intermarriage between those tribes some generations back in order for Mary to be a relative of Elizabeth. Elizabeth is described as a daughter of Aaron, which would make her a Levite, where Mary is a Judean of the tribe of Judah. But that's no big problem at all, because there was much intermarriage between the tribes.

That was entirely permissible under the law. Well, let's get into this. It says, 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, here's the introduction to this couple. They are aged and barren, very reminiscent of a number of couples in the Old Testament who produced significant offspring. The first of which being, of course, Sarah.

Sarah and Abram were said to be too advanced in years to have children. Sarah's womb was dead. Abram was as good as dead.

We're told that in the Scriptures. And yet, it was from such a womb and from such a couple that God chose to bring forth the promised seed, Isaac. Then when Isaac married, his wife Rebekah was barren also for 20 years.

And only by prayer was her womb opened. We're told in the book of Genesis that Isaac prayed for his wife, because she had borne him no children. She was barren.

God had closed her womb. And 20 years after they were married, she gave birth to her twins. Then, of course, Jacob, one of the twins, married some women.

The one he loved most, Rachel, was barren also for most of their married life. She finally gave him two sons and died in childbearing of the second son. Further on down through the history of Israel, we find that the mother of Samuel, Hannah, was barren.

She was one of two wives of a man named Elkanah. The other wife bore him ten children, or several children. I don't remember if ten was the right number.

But she gave him several children, which suggests that Hannah's barrenness was made the more stark and more troublesome by the rivalry between them that she was unable to bear any children while the other wife was giving the man many. And once again, Hannah, through prayer, saw her womb opened. God opened her womb and gave her Samuel, who became the pivotal player of his generation, perhaps one of the pivotal

players in all of Israel's history.

The one who was the last of the judges and the first of the order of the prophets. The one who guided Israel through the transition from the 300-year period of the judges into the 300-something year period of the kings, who ordained the first two kings of Israel. This man's mother was barren for years before he was born.

It would seem, as if God is trying to say something through all of this, that God wanted it to be known that the birth of these people was not a matter of simply biology taking its course. I think it's very important for us to understand this. This is true not only in these special cases.

These special cases simply underscore the general truth, that God is the one who opens the womb and God is the one who closes the womb. And while it may seem to some that this is a very unscientific view, and that we are now, of course, able, in ways that they could not back then, of explaining biologically how the genetic material is combined in order to produce a new life and so forth, that is simply a description of the mechanics. That is not really a description of the real cause of the conception.

The real cause of the conception is God. And God is the one who opens these wombs. Now, I am inclined to see in Luke's narrative a number of things that, while I take them literally as true, I also see them as types or possibly, how shall I put it, symbolic.

You know, God commonly does things in history that he intends to symbolize or foreshadow other things. Many things in the Old Testament foreshadow Christ. And I think there's a number of things in these Old Testament stories, in the opening chapters of Luke, because they are Old Testament stories.

The New Testament wasn't initiated until Jesus died. Therefore, the Gospels all took place in an Old Testament economy, in an Old Testament environment. When we read about John the Baptist's life, we're reading about an Old Testament character, even though his story is told in what we call the New Testament.

He lived and died before the coming of the New Testament. Therefore, like other Jews before him, like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Daniel, David, and all those people, he was an Old Testament Jew. Though he lived in the transitional period and was able to introduce the coming of the New, just like Samuel before introduced the passage from the period of the judges to the period of the kings, so John the Baptist introduced the passage of the Old Covenant and the coming of the New.

Both of those men came from mothers who were for a long time barren, and both of whom were born only as the result of prayer. Now, that doesn't mean they were virgin-born. They were conceived through natural processes, but only because of prayer did God permit them to be conceived.

And, you know, there's a statement back in Isaiah chapter 54 that might give some clue as to why God so frequently did this, that He brought forth significant changes through persons that had been barren previously. Many of the turning points in Israel's history came through sons who were conceived from wombs that had formerly been barren. In Isaiah 54, it says, verse 1, Sing, O barren, you who have not borne, break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not labored with child.

For more are the children of the desolate than the children of a married woman, says the Lord. Now, it goes on in this passage to talk about the Gentiles coming in. It says, make your tent bigger, expect a larger family, because you're going to inherit the nations, it says in verse 3. The Gentiles are going to be coming in.

This barren one who's going to bring forth all these children is the Gentile nations. And Paul tells us so. In Galatians chapter 4, he quotes this verse.

And he applies it to, basically, the church which is drawn largely from among the Gentiles. The Gentile nations in Isaiah's day were barren in terms of bringing forth any children for God. The children of God came from Israel.

She was the married wife. Israel was married to God and had a husband. This predicts, however, the coming of the new covenant.

This predicts the time when the Gentile nations who were in Isaiah's day barren would actually bring forth more children into the kingdom of God than the married wife, Israel, would. And certainly we've seen the fulfillment of that. The church is predominantly populated by Gentiles today, and only the smaller part are Jews.

But it's interesting that the Gentile nations are represented as a barren woman who has never been able to bear and bring forth any significant fruit. And yet, the time of the introduction of the church age is described as a barren woman beginning to have children so that the Gentiles will eventually begin to produce more fruit than Israel ever did. That's the suggestion of Isaiah 54, and Paul quotes it to make that point in Galatians 4. It's possible that the barren wombs of various women, especially of Elizabeth, who lived at that very transition time that Isaiah is speaking of, the very time when God was introducing the new order, which would eventually bring about the influx of a great number of Gentiles, that Elizabeth was herself a barren woman.

And she had borne nothing. But she was to rejoice and to sing because she was going to have her womb opened. It's not impossible that Elizabeth's bringing forth of this child, coming as it did at the very time that Isaiah's prophecy was about to be fulfilled, might have been sort of a graphic picture of that prophecy being fulfilled, that the barren was soon to bear a child.

Perhaps, maybe not. It's hard to know. There's a number of things like this in the story

that I'd like to point out, but they're simply open to question.

But there are interesting parallels that can be drawn from comparing Scripture to Scripture. Now, this couple were both of the priestly family. Zacharias was a priest, not high priest.

Don't confuse that. I've heard people mistakenly say that John the Baptist's father was a high priest. He was not.

Just a priest. There were thousands of them. Probably tens of thousands of them.

Everybody who was descended from Aaron was a priest. But only the firstborn son of each generation of the high priest would be the next high priest. That was the way it was passed down.

But by this time, 1400 years after Aaron's lifetime, there were literally tens of thousands of persons who could claim Aaron as their ancestor. Likewise, Elizabeth was from that priestly line. Although women could not be priests, she was from the same family of Aaron.

And had she been a man, she would have been a priest. So here we have a couple of impeccable credentials as far as priestly pedigree go. And they're not only of impeccable pedigree, they're of impeccable life.

We're told, it says, that they were both righteous, verse 6 says, before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. This will trouble some people who feel sort of a duty to deny that anybody could be blameless and keep the commandments of the Lord. Because doesn't the Bible say, all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and there's none righteous, no not one, there's none that doeth good.

Well, when David said there's none that doeth good, he was describing his own times. Of course, he himself, no doubt, included himself as an exception as one who was doing good. At least sometimes he did good.

And Paul quotes it in Romans 3 to make the point that all people have sinned. And this is not denying that there was any sin ever in these people's lives. Only their outward conduct could be evaluated in this way.

By the way, Job was given a similar endorsement. That he was blameless before the Lord, that he eschewed evil and feared God. There are certain people in the Bible, in the Old Testament, who are described as persons that God had nothing against.

Now, that is not to say that they never sinned in any way in thought, word, or deed. In fact, everybody has. But they were people of faith.

And just like Abraham, his faith was imputed to him for righteousness. David's faith was imputed to him for righteousness. No doubt, all Jews who had faith, their faith was imputed to them for righteousness so that God didn't hold anything against them.

But this is not a reference to their inner life or even to their eternal life or their eternal standing before God or their justification. This is talking about their outward behavior. These people, because of their love for God, because of their faith, were scrupulous in obeying the laws.

They would never touch an unclean thing or do anything that would alienate them from the worship of the temple. They were people who kept the laws, at least outwardly, without any blame whatsoever. To say they were blameless means no one could really pin anything on them.

No one could blame them because outwardly they did nothing wrong. And I'm not trying to suggest that inwardly they were full of dead men's bones because they were not. They were godly inwardly as well.

But their outward conduct that's discussed here is mainly talking about just that, their outward conduct. They were a good witness. They were scrupulous.

They were careful in obedience to the law of God. And this because they were believers in God and lovers of God. They were a prayerful couple.

They were very old, but they were apparently still praying for a child, judging from what the angel says to them a little later. And so they were really people of faith. And so we find John the Baptist had some very good parents.

Now it says in verse 5 that Zacharias was of the division of Abijah. Just so you understand what this means, back in 2 Chronicles 24, we are told that in David's day there were too many priests to all of them give attendance at the altar. The job of a priest was to give attendance in the tabernacle, to burn incense there and offer sacrifices there.

That's what a priest did. But once you had several tens of thousands of priests, you couldn't keep them all busy at the same altar. And there was only one tabernacle.

Only one guy could burn incense at a time. And so what David did was to divide the priesthood into 24 divisions, here referred to as courses. It says division here, I think the King James says courses.

He was of the division of Abijah. There were 24 divisions of the priests, and each division had a certain time of the year that they supplied manpower or a man to burn the incense in the temple. Since only one man could do it at a time, twice a year.

Each of these 24 courses would get one week. So altogether they get two weeks per year. That makes 48 weeks.

I'm not sure what they did with the other weeks. But, well, I really don't know how they handled the extra weeks of the year. But according to historians, each of the 24 courses got two weeks, two separate weeks during the year.

And during each week, one of the 24 divisions would have that week to provide one man to do the ministry in the temple of burning incense. Now, this was chosen by lot, by casting lots. Every man, of course, hoped that he might be able to burn incense in the temple, but there were so many priests that a man might live an entire lifetime and never be selected.

After all, there's only two weeks out of any given year that a guy's own division would be chosen to provide. And even if he lived 70 years, that would be only 140 different time slots. And there must have been thousands of priests in each group.

So it was a rare privilege to be selected by lot. It was considered to be, you know, of God, that God selected the man at each time to fill in. And when he did, he would serve for one week.

Every day of that week he'd burn incense in the temple. And then he wouldn't be able to ever do it again in his life. It's a once in a lifetime deal.

After he'd done it once, he had to make room for others to have a chance. And so he was out of the running in the future casting of lots. So this man, Zacharias, was chosen by the casting of lots.

We're told that, actually. It says in verse 9, According to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. So he was chosen by lot.

Now, when you cast lots, it's like throwing dice. You know, it seems like chance determines the outcome. But we can hardly believe that chance determined the choice of Zacharias on this occasion.

For reasons unknown to us, God wished to appear to him by an angel in the temple. Otherwise he could have appeared in his bedroom any day of the week, or any day of his life. But God desired for an angel to appear to him while he burned incense in the temple.

And, therefore, it was necessary for the man to have a chance to do that. So when the lots were cast on this occasion, we have to assume that God's sovereignty saw to it that not chance, but God, brought about the result of the casting of the lots. In Proverbs 16.33, Solomon expresses his confidence in the sovereignty of God even in such matters

that seem to be matters of chance.

Proverbs 16.33 says, The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. The lot is cast in the lap, but its decision comes from the Lord. It appears to be a matter of chance alone, but it isn't.

God ordains its outcome. That's what Solomon is saying. And what he's saying is that those things that appear to be mere chance, there's no coincidences.

Its every decision comes from God. God is sovereignly involved in all those things, even those which seem to be dictated by chance. That's perhaps good to know.

When the apostles wanted to choose a replacement for Judas in Acts chapter 1, they needed to know the mind of God. They knew that Jesus had selected the original twelve, and no one other than Jesus would have the authority to select a replacement. So they said, well, God will cast lots, and you choose, through the casting of lots, which one you want.

They picked Matthias and another guy, and the lot fell to Matthias. And they assumed forever afterwards that God had made the decision through the casting of lots. There are denominations.

I think the Mennonites do this, and the Amish, and there have been others like the Hutterites and some other denominations. I think the Moravians may have done this, different Christian movements in history, that have chosen their ministers by the casting of lots, because they felt, on the biblical basis of these passages, that God sovereignly determines in the casting of lots. After all, if you could choose an apostle that way, it would seem justified to pick a minister of a church that way.

Anyway, whether this is a good way for us to find guidance or not, I don't know. Most churches feel a little uncomfortable with that kind of confidence in God's sovereignty. But the apostles apparently felt comfortable with it, and some modern groups still do.

At any rate, we can be fairly sure that when the lot fell, to have Zacharias chosen to be in this role at this time, burning the incense, that it was no accident, that God arranged it so that he could have this meeting with him. By the way, the name Zacharias here is simply the Greek form of the name Zechariah. And Zechariah is a very, very common name among the Jews.

Over 36 different men in the Old Testament, or in the Bible, are called Zechariah. There are over 36 different Zechariahs in the Bible, so a very common name. Of course, one of them wrote a book of the Old Testament.

Now, his division of the priesthood, the division of Abijah was chosen. Then it was their week, and he was chosen by lot. Out of that, this would be a once-in-a-lifetime deal.

He'd never do it again in his life. And so he goes in, and it's a high privilege for him and an honor to his family that he gets to go on in and burn the incense. So it says in verse 8, So it was, while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, 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. Now, the association with the idea of incense burning in prayer here, the people were praying outside at the hour of incense, is really something that harks back to the Old Testament. I don't know if there's a cross-reference here, because I don't have it memorized, but in the Psalms, David actually said, May my prayer be set out before you as incense.

Maybe there's a cross-reference here, I don't know. I don't see one. But in the Psalms, David said, Let my prayer be set out before you as incense.

And in the book of Revelation, I can give you references to this. In Revelation chapter 5 and verse 8, we see in heaven one of the elders offering incense, and it said, Now when he had taken the scroll, when the lamb did, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the lamb, each having a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. The incense is the prayers of the saints.

Then again in Revelation chapter 8, and it says in verse 3, Then another angel, having golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. So the burning of incense on the golden altar has its counterpart in heaven.

The incense corresponds to the prayers of the saints. And in the ritual of the Jews, it was likewise that the people out in the congregation were praying, offering their prayers up, while the priest was inside burning the incense, offering the incense up. The rising of the smoke of the incense to God was symbolic of the rising of the prayers to God.

And it was at this very time that an angel appeared to announce that a particular prayer had been answered. And the burning of incense by this priest no doubt symbolized his ongoing prayer life, the fact that he had been praying all this time for his son. We find that to be obviously the case when the angel says to him that his prayers have been answered.

We'll see as we come along here. Okay, so, 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. This was a fairly typical reaction whenever people saw angels in the Bible. But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, which is almost always the first thing an angel says in the Bible.

Check it out. There's many angelic appearances. Most of the time, their very first words

an angel says are, Do not be afraid, which suggests that when people see angels, they tend to be afraid and need to be told not to.

People who claim to see angels today may in fact see them, but I'd like to know what the angel said. If they don't say, Don't be afraid, or if the person doesn't suggest that they had fear as their first emotion when they saw an angel, I wonder whether they're having a genuine experience similar to those in the Bible. This man, the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard.

The very hour that he is offering incense up, which represents prayer, his prayer is announced to have been heard by God. And your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. Now, I've suggested on the basis of the angel's word, your prayer has been heard and you're going to have a son.

That suggests that Elizabeth and Zechariah had been praying for a son, and one could hardly doubt that they would. A Jewish couple would want very desperately to have as many sons as possible, at least one, to carry on the family name. It's a very great disaster for a person to die childless and have no one to carry on their name.

And so we can be quite sure these godly people were praying regularly, but were they still praying? I suggested that they were still praying on into their old age about it. It would seem to be suggested that even as he was offering his prayer, offering the incense, he was again offering his prayer for his son. And the angel appears and said, your prayer is heard.

Now, if that is the true way of looking at it, then this couple must have been very full of faith. Abraham and Sarah, both, when they were in similar physical condition to Zechariah and Elizabeth, laughed at the suggestion that they would have a son. Abraham laughed because it seemed ridiculous to him, and Sarah laughed because it seemed ridiculous to her.

It would seem that maybe they didn't expect it. They weren't even praying for it anymore. They had Ishmael.

He was now 13 years old. What would they need to pray for another son for? And it would seem that Abraham and Sarah had even given up on praying for a son, and when they heard they were going to get one, it was ludicrous to them, a laughable matter. Now, it didn't seem laughable to Zechariah, and in fact he may not have given up praying, which may suggest his faith is even in excess of that of Abraham, that he would still be praying for a child when he was as good as dead and his wife's womb was as good as dead.

Now, there's another possibility of seeing this, that perhaps Zechariah and Elizabeth had long hence stopped praying for a son. I mean, after she reached menopause, it would

obviously have taken a miracle after that for a woman to have a child, and if she was very advanced in age, we can probably assume that she was post-menopausal. Therefore, it would be reasonable enough for Zechariah and Elizabeth to have resigned themselves to the will of God, that they not have a son.

And they may have stopped praying before this, and if that is the case, it would suggest this, that even after the prayers stop going up, they're not forgotten, even though God may not answer them for perhaps many years later. God doesn't forget the prayers. We don't know.

We don't know whether this old couple was still praying in exceptionally strong faith, that even though it was impossible for them to have a child, they were still praying that God would give them one. In which case, there would be certainly exceptions in the great... they would belong to the great hall of fame of people of faith, if that were so. Or else, they had maybe not continued to pray up to the present year, maybe they had stopped praying some years ago, but their prayers were not forgotten, and now God sends an angel to announce that it's now time for those prayers to be answered.

In either case, it's instructive that God answers prayers of faith, even though they may be delayed. And no doubt they had started praying before they were old. They must have been praying for a very long time for this, and yet God finally comes at what would seem to be the time that was too late.

When Lazarus was sick, his sisters sent a message to Jesus saying, the one that you love is sick, implying, please come heal him. But Jesus waited two days, and then Lazarus died. And then he made a trip down to Bethany to visit the sisters, and the first thing that both the sisters said independently when they saw him was, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died.

Strongly suggesting that, Lord, you waited too long. If you had come before he was dead, there would have been hope, but why didn't you? It's beyond hope now. It's simply too late.

Well, Jesus knew it wasn't too late. It seemed too late, because their brother was dead, but little did they know Jesus planned it that way, and that he intended to raise him from the dead and did so. Similarly, our prayers often are not answered as quickly as we think they should, or even after the point where it seems it's the point of no return, when it's too late, when we ought to just give up on all hope.

Yet there may be hope beyond that, because it's never really too late for God. Elizabeth and Zacharias, just like Abram and Sarah, were dead. God had waited too long.

No doubt they had prayed for some time when it wasn't too late, but now it was too late. Whether they continued to pray in exceptional faith or not, we don't know. But in any

case, God waited until it seemed too late.

But then he proved it wasn't too late, because he was able to do exceedingly abundantly far beyond what anyone would ask or think. And so he announced that you're going to have a child. His name is going to be John.

Verse 14, 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, that is, before the Lord their God, 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.

Now, this is the announcement about John. First, everything is exceptional about the announcement. First of all, that there's going to be a child at all from this couple that was incapable of bearing a child.

That was surprising in itself. Next, he was said his name is going to be called John. Well, that wasn't a family name.

In fact, we know that there became a bit of a controversy in the family over what he should be named, and the father agreed to call him John because the angel had, but the rest of the family wanted to name him something else after his father. Then he's told that the son will be great. In other words, he's not just going to be an answer to prayer because you folks needed a child, and it was a shame for you to die childless.

God's finally going to give you your request, and you'll have the consolation of having a little boy before you die. That would have been a nice answer to prayer in itself, but that's not what's involved here. There is that, but there's more.

He's going to be exceptional. He's going to be great. He's going to be a Nazarite.

That's what is implied when it says he won't drink wine or strong drink all the days of his life. The word Nazarite means a separated one. And in Numbers chapter 6, there was the law of the Nazarite.

If a person wished to separate himself to God permanently or for a short period of time, he could take a vow of the Nazarite. It could be as short as a month long, or it could be as long as a lifetime long. During the time that a person was under the Nazarite vow, there were three restrictions upon him.

One was they could not eat or drink anything that was a product of the grapevine. They could neither drink grape juice nor wine. They couldn't eat grapes or even raisins.

Anything that was the produce of the vine, they were to abstain from during the period of their vow. Secondly, they had to abstain from any contact with a dead body. This would mean even if a relative of theirs died or something, they couldn't attend the funeral, that would be a defilement that would violate their vow.

They'd have no contact with a dead body. And thirdly, they were not to cut any of their hair, neither facial hair nor the hair of their head, for all the days of their vow. Now, if the vow was only a month or so long, it wouldn't make a real big difference in that respect, but there were a few guys in the Bible who had lifetime Nazarite vows.

Samson is, of course, the most famous for this fact. Samuel also was a lifetime Nazarite, just like John the Baptist was. John the Baptist was a lifetime Nazarite, as is suggested by the fact that he will not drink wine or strong drink.

This is something that would apparently be his lifetime vocation as a Nazarite. Not everybody took the vow for a lifetime. The Apostle Paul took the vow once at Centuria.

We don't know how long he took it for, but it was only for a short period of time. He shaved his head afterwards. That was part of the vow too.

When you begin your vow, you shave your head, and then during the time of your vow, you grow your hair out and don't cut it anymore until your vow is over. And when your vow is over, you shave your hair and burn it. It's called the hair of your separation.

It's the hair that grew on your body or your head while you were separated under God in this vow. And so a person at the end of the period of the vow would shave his head and his beard and burn the hair as an offering to the Lord. Paul did this at least once, we're told, in Acts chapter 20, I believe it is.

Well, no, that was another thing. He was on his way back to Jerusalem at that time. He shaved his head before he got to Jerusalem.

But when he got to Jerusalem, James requested that Paul would pay the price, the charges for four men of the Jerusalem church who had such a vow. And it was apparently time for them to go finish their vow and shave their heads and offer the sacrifices that were related with that process, and that would cost something. And so James asked if Paul would go and pay for it to show his support for their observance of the law, and he did.

So, a Nazarite vow would be sometimes just for a short period of time, sometimes a lifetime. John the Baptist was one of those who had it for a lifetime, which means any pictures you see of him with hair that's about shoulder length are not accurate. At age 30, he would have had hair down to, well, who knows where, and a beard too, to match it.

He would have never cut his hair or his beard in all his life. Same thing with Samuel, and the same thing with Samson. And there's a good chance that that was true also of Elijah, though we're not specifically told that.

He is described as a hairy man in 2 Kings 1, and therefore some have felt that he was maybe a Nazarite. Since John the Baptist comes in the spirit and power of Elijah and has much in common with Elijah, some have felt that his Nazarite vow might be another aspect in which he's like Elijah. Well, I assume somebody here has come to be known as a hairy man.

They're just jealous, Sandy. Now, John was to be a Nazarite under the vow from his mother's womb. He was also to be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb.

Now, prophets in the Old Testament were sometimes said to be filled with the Holy Spirit, although the fullness of the Holy Spirit as we know it never became a general blessing to all of God's people until the day of Pentecost. But there were individuals who were filled with the Spirit in the sense that they had the prophetic anointing. John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb.

Now, this could mean from the moment of his birth, when he comes from the womb, from that point from the womb, he was filled with the Spirit. Or it could even mean from the time that he was even in the womb. Later on in the story, when Mary greets Elizabeth, and Elizabeth is pregnant with John, the Bible says that he leaped in her womb.

And it says that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and the babe in her womb leapt, which might suggest that the baby was filled with the Spirit at that moment, because when Elizabeth tells the story a few verses later, she says, When I heard your greeting, the babe within me leapt for joy. Now, the suggestion that a baby in the womb can be filled with the Holy Spirit, can leap for joy, and so forth, certainly gives us some direction in deciding when life begins. It would at least place it sometimes prior to birth.

God doesn't just fill tissue blobs with the Holy Spirit. And therefore, we would have to say that the full personhood of John the Baptist was acknowledged and affirmed prior to his birth, while still in the womb. It seems to have happened when he was six months.

It would be at the beginning of the third trimester, but there's no reason to believe that he was not anymore a person prior to that than he was after that. The point is that birth is not the point at which human beings become human beings. And John was filled with the Spirit probably while in the womb.

He certainly leaped for joy while he was in the womb, and that would bode poorly for those who wish to say that a person is not really human, not really a viable human life, worthy of protection or whatever, until after birth. By the way, I once heard an atheist

debating with a Christian about this very thing on the radio. And the atheist was, of course, in favor of abortion and was arguing that the baby in the womb is not really a baby, is not really human, because if you just take it out of the womb, it can't live.

It's dependent on the womb for survival. The Christian missed his opportunity to answer that. The very obvious answer is that a baby after birth can't live without a lot of support either.

Certainly, the point of birth is not the point at which a baby becomes capable of independent existence. The baby is entirely dependent on its parents for many months after birth as well. So if we're going to say that if you took a baby out of the womb and sat it there, it'll die, that proves it's not human.

Then I would have to say you could do the same with a baby that's already been born and maybe several months along, and the same would be true. It also cannot live without help. So, anyway, that's just a sidelight on the question of the humanity or personhood of a baby in the womb.

Now, concerning John, it says in verse 16 and 17, 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. Now, to say that he would go in the spirit and power of Elijah has given some the impression that maybe John was a reincarnation of Elijah.

After all, he came in the spirit of Elijah. Does this mean that Elijah's spirit came back again in the form of this baby? There have been some who have mistakenly thought that John was the reincarnation of Elijah. The problem is, of course, that in order for a person to be reincarnated, according to that doctrine, they have to die.

Elijah never died. Presumably, Elijah's spirit never was severed from his body. And, therefore, for it to inhabit another body, it would mean the spirit of Elijah would have to inhabit two bodies at once.

The one of Elijah, which never died, and the new one, too. So, it's impossible to reconcile this with what some would teach. That is, of course, people who try to teach reincarnation from the Bible are really at a loss to find passages that can rightly be used to teach that.

This is certainly one that doesn't work. Elijah never died, and, therefore, there's no possibility of him being reincarnated. Because for reincarnation to occur, even by the theories of those who believe in it, a person has to die, their spirit has to separate from their body, and then go into another body later, and be incarnated at a separate time.

Now, John was, however, in the spirit and power of Elijah. And that means that there were many things, spiritually, that were parallel between the ministry of Elijah and the ministry of John. One of those things probably had to do with the way they dressed.

We're told in 1 Kings that Elijah wore a leather belt. We're also told that John the Baptist wore a leather belt, as well as a garment of camel's hair. Camel's hair was really cloth woven from camel's hair, which was like very coarse sackcloth, very uncomfortable cloth, the kind of cloth that people would put on if they were very poor, or if they were repenting.

People would often put on sackcloth and ashes to indicate repentance. John's message was a message of repentance, and therefore his clothing may have been a graphic illustration of the call to repent by wearing sackcloth of camel's hair. But the leather belt was an unusual thing, because although we wear them all the time, in that society, people wore robes which were tied around the waist with a cloth sash.

A leather belt was unusual. It was more of a military piece of equipment. The Romans had a leather girdle that they attached their sword to and stuff, although it's unlikely that John's belt was of a military style.

But interestingly, Elijah stood out in his own generation also as one who wore such clothing, a leather belt. And therefore, one of the similarities at least between John and Elijah would have to be seen in their dress, and possibly also in their having a... it could be in their having taken the Nazarite vow. You probably are wondering where I'm getting this description of Elijah.

It comes from 2 Kings 1, 8. So they answered him, a hairy man wearing a leather belt around his waist. And he said, it's Elijah the Tishbite. So Elijah is described as a hairy man who wore a leather belt.

Sandy, I suggest you should probably wear suspenders to avoid the association. John the Baptist is specifically stated later in chapter 3 of Luke as wearing a leather belt. There were other similarities, however.

Elijah was sent to call the nation to repentance at a time of great compromise when they were facing national disaster. Elijah was. Elijah came to the northern kingdom of Israel and announced that God was going to judge them and called them to repentance.

So did John the Baptist. He came at a similar time. When the judgment of 70 AD was not so far away.

And when he came and called the nation to repentance, to prepare their hearts for God. He was like Elijah in that respect, too. Also, Elijah spent a good deal of his time out in the wilderness.

That's where John the Baptist lived as well, out in the wilderness. They were kind of loners, both of them. They kind of lived out a hermit's sort of lifestyle.

Another point of similarity that's maybe a bit interesting and maybe not too significant

was that both Elijah and John the Baptist were persecuted by henpecked kings. Elijah's life was threatened by Jezebel, the queen, who was definitely a henpecker. Her husband Ahab was a wimp.

And she definitely called the plays in that family. She wore the pants in the family. And it's true also of the queen who eventually ended up bringing about the end of John the Baptist, Herodias.

Herod was a wimp. And he kind of respected and feared John the Baptist. But Herodias persuaded him to have him killed.

So, both Elijah and John lived at a time when Israel was ruled over by a king who was really ruled over by his wife in each case. Lived in the wilderness. Called the nation to repentance.

Probably were both Nazarites and both dressed in unusual ways. In these respects, there is a similarity between John and Elijah. But the similarity is not to be one of identity.

John was not Elijah in the literal sense of a reincarnation or reappearance of Elijah the Tishbite. In John chapter 1, which of course we'll have to study in detail another time, but a group from Jerusalem came to ask John about who he was. And in John 1.21, they asked him, What then? Are you Elijah? And he said, I am not.

John 1.21 They said, Are you Elijah? He said, I'm not. However, one would get the impression Jesus didn't agree with John on this point. Because in Matthew chapter 11, in Matthew 11, verse 12 through 14, Jesus said, And from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.

For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John, John was the end of the time of the law and the prophets. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. He said, If you can receive it, John is Elijah who is to come.

And by saying who is to come, he's referring to the prediction of the Old Testament, that Elijah was to come. That prediction is found in Malachi 4, verses 5 and 6. Now, Jesus is saying that if you will receive it, John the Baptist is in fact the fulfillment of Malachi 4, verses 5 and 6, which say, Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse, or the land with a curse.

Notice, those are the last words of the Old Testament. And John the Baptist ministry is the first thing in the New Testament. The Old Testament closes with a prediction, and the New Testament opens with the fulfillment of that prediction.

John the Baptist was that fulfillment. Jesus said, If you can receive it, he is Elijah who is to

come. But then why did John say he wasn't Elijah? That's what gets confusing.

Jesus said he was. John said of himself that he wasn't. The answer would be, I think, found when you look at Matthew chapter 17.

The disciples are coming down the mountain of transfiguration where they have seen on the mountain Elijah. They saw Elijah and Moses with Jesus. Matthew 17.

Moses and Elijah have both appeared on the mountain with Jesus. As the disciples are coming down, they are reminded, since they saw Elijah, they are reminded of the prediction that Elijah was going to come. Namely, the prediction from Malachi.

It's the only prediction in the Old Testament on the subject. And so, in verse 10, his disciples asked him, saying, Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first? Jesus answered and said to them, Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already.

And they did not know him, but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise, the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood that he spoke to them of John the Baptist.

Now, twice Jesus identifies John the Baptist as Elijah. But the question of the disciples, Why do the scribes say Elijah is going to come first? shows us that the scribes had their own way of understanding Malachi. They predicted that literal Elijah was going to come back first.

This came to the disciples' mind because they had seen the real Elijah up on the mountain just a moment ago. And they said, Yeah, the scribes say that Elijah is going to come first, don't they? But you see, the scribes thought it was going to be the same Elijah as the Old Testament guy. They thought it would be Elijah the Tishbite, who lived in the days of Ahab and Jezebel, come back again.

And when they said to John, Are you him? Are you Elijah? He said, No. Because he knew what they meant. In their meaning of the question, Are you the same guy? Are you that Elijah from the Old Testament? Are you back? He says, No.

No, that's not who I am. But Jesus indicated that the Malachi prophecy should be interpreted spiritually. Not Elijah personally, but one who comes in the spirit of Elijah.

Not the literal historic Elijah, but another one coming in the spirit and power of Elijah. Now look back at Luke chapter 1 at the angel's words. The angel says in Luke 1.17, He will also go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children.

You recognize that line from Malachi. That line, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the

children, is a direct quote from the Malachi passage, Malachi 4.6. Which shows that the angel is in fact identifying John the Baptist with the fulfillment of that prophecy. He's saying that Malachi's prophecy is going to be fulfilled, here and now, with this baby, with this person.

And the disobedient to the wisdom of the just. And to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Now, those latter lines in verse 17 are not from Malachi.

Although, when it says to turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, it probably is a paraphrase of the line in Malachi that says, and the hearts of the children to the fathers. Malachi says he'll turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers. Only the first of those two lines is quoted, and the other one is apparently paraphrased.

The turning of the hearts of the children to the fathers is interpreted as the disobedient turn to the wisdom of the just. So that children and fathers does not refer to actual children and their fathers, so much as those who are true spiritual fathers in Israel, the just, the righteous ones, and those who are disobedient, like disobedient children, their hearts need to be turned. Their hearts need to learn the wisdom from the righteous.

And that's what John the Baptist would come to do. And this very wording is deliberately a fulfillment of Malachi. So the prophecy with which the Old Testament closes, the New Testament opens with its fulfillment.

And so he's saying that the time has come for God to send Elijah, but it will be another man coming in the spirit and the power of Elijah. Verse 18, Now Zechariah said to the angel, How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well 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.

But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day when these things take place. Because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their own time. Now, this passage is usually interpreted as sort of a judgment on Zechariah because of his lack of faith.

The angel told him he was going to have a son. He said, How can this be? I'm old, my wife is old. And somehow, some represent this as the angel got a little upset.

What? You don't believe me? I'll show you then. Boom! You're deaf. You're dumb.

I mean, not deaf, but dumb. For nine months. That'll show you, not to doubt.

That's not what I understand to be happening here at all. The man can hardly be blamed for wondering about the message. First of all, the angel had not previously identified himself.

He was just a heavenly being. I don't think we're expected to believe every spirit that appears to us. We're supposed to test the spirits and see if these things are so.

Some spirits can be deceivers. There were deceiving spirits in the Old Testament too. There were lion spirits in the mouth of Ahab's prophets.

There was an apparition, a spirit that appeared to one of Job's counselors in the night and gave him false doctrine. There's certainly no reason why Zechariah should be blamed for questioning this messenger, who had not yet identified himself as Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God. He does after the question is raised by Zechariah.

Furthermore, it's not an unfair question. Mary asked a very similar question. When the same angel talked to her, she said, How can this be? I don't know a man.

She expressed the same question, the same kind of a question. Now, God didn't hold that against her, and I don't really think God held it against Zechariah. I don't think this dumbness on the part of Zechariah was a judgment.

I think it was a sign. He said, How can I know that this is going to happen? And the angel said, Well, since you didn't believe, I'll give you a sign. Here's the sign.

You won't be able to speak until the baby is born. Now, that's not intended as a judgment, though it would, of course, create some inconvenience in his life, not being able to speak. But it was no doubt intended not as a judgment, but as a sign to Zechariah and to others, to know that something supernatural was indeed afoot.

Furthermore, it was not an insignificant sign. The silence of this man for nine months, which was broken when his son was born. You remember when John the Baptist was named, that's when the silence was broken, and Zechariah began to prophesy again.

Here is a guy who represents the priesthood, and eventually is a prophet. But between his role as a priest and his role as a prophet, there is a period of silence. It's interesting that this silence is broken with the birth of John the Baptist.

I think it's interesting that God observed a strict prophetic silence for 400 years until John the Baptist was born. Malachi was the last prophet of the Old Testament. And after Malachi, there were 400 years that God was silent.

He gave no prophecies. That silence was broken with the coming of John the Baptist. John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the predictions of the previous prophet, who had prophesied 400 years before.

Those 400 years are often called the 400 years of silence, because God didn't send any prophecy. The prophetic spirit was dumb during that time. But that period of dumbness, that period of silence, ended with the coming of John the Baptist.

And no doubt, Zechariah's own period of dumbness represented that longer period where God had not been speaking, but where he began to speak again when John came. The prophetic spirit was revived with the birth of John. Likewise, Zechariah's own capability of speech was restored at that time.

Now, maybe that's reading too much into it. But what would you read into it? What is the value of the man being dumb? It's not really a severe judgment. And if not for symbolic reasons, what's the value of the sign? It doesn't serve any purpose.

It would seem to me that the dumbness of Zechariah is a sign, like many of the signs in the Bible that portray some spiritual message. And it was not given because the angel was angry, but because Zechariah didn't believe and needed a sign, needed something to help him believe, and so he was given a sign. And that is how it's explained.

Okay, now, we are now in verse 21. And the people waited outside for Zechariah. They marveled that he lingered so long in the temple.

It usually didn't take that long to burn the incense. But when he came out, he could not speak to them. And they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple.

I'm not sure how they perceived that. Maybe he had a glassy look in his face, on his eyes or something. But they could see that something had happened out of the ordinary.

He was wild-eyed or crazy or gesturing wildly with his arms. He beckoned with his arms, but remained speechless. So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed from his own house.

Fortunately, unlike modern preachers, the priest didn't have to talk for their ministry. If a preacher was struck dumb, that would be the end of his sermonizing for the next nine months in that case. But the priest only had to burn incense silently before the Lord.

So he was able to finish out that week. That was his privilege to do, even though he couldn't speak. So he finished out his days of service.

And then he departed to his own house. Now, after those days, his wife Elizabeth conceived, and she hid herself for five months, saying, Thus the Lord has dealt with me in the days when he looked upon me to take away my reproach from among people. Now, she hid herself for five months.

I don't really know why. She certainly wasn't embarrassed. She says this pregnancy took away her reproach.

It didn't give her a reproach. These days, if an elderly woman, say, even as old as 50 or so, would get pregnant, which is not always impossible to happen, people would almost look at it as sort of a... They'd make off-color remarks. It would seem strange, even kind

of shameful, kind of embarrassing.

But not then. For a woman to die childless was far more embarrassing than for her to be found pregnant at age 70 or 80 or 90, or however old she happened to be. That was the taking away of her reproach.

Her hiding for five months was not a matter of her being embarrassed. It was no doubt she wanted solitude, for the same reasons that Paul wanted solitude after he was saved. Or, you know, he went away and didn't really do an awful lot, it seems, for about three years after his conversion.

Probably needed to think things through. Probably needed to reflect on what was going on. Mary, when she became pregnant and after her baby was born, the Bible says she kept those things in her heart, and she meditated on them, she pondered them in her heart.

Amazing things were happening in these days, and the people who were instrumental in them no doubt wanted some time to think without all the distractions of people asking questions and so forth. I mean, just think how the relatives would be. You know, are you sure you feel okay? You shouldn't be standing up so long.

A woman in your condition, blah, blah, blah. She just went into seclusion for five months, no doubt for the sake of just contemplation and prayer and whatever. But at any rate, she for five months hid herself, and that's the last we hear of her, for a while, because the scene now shifts to Galilee.

Now, Elizabeth lived down in Judea, in one of the Levitical cities there. We're not told which one, but in one of the Levitical cities in Judea, we find out later, is where Elizabeth and Zacharias lived. But Mary lived at the other end of the country, though they were somehow related.

She lived up in Galilee in Nazareth. Verse 26, Now in the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

And having come in, the angel said to her, Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you, blessed are you among women. But when she saw him, she was troubled at this saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God, and behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bring forth a son, and shall call his name Jesus.

He will be great, and will be called the son of the highest. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever.

And of his kingdom there will be no end. Then Mary said to the angel, How can this be,

since I do not know a man? And the angel answered and said to her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the highest will overshadow you. Therefore also that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.

Now indeed Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible. Then Mary said, Behold the maidservant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word.

And the angel departed from her. Now this is the same angel who has announced to Zacharias that his wife will have a child. Now this angel doesn't go to Joseph to say that his betrothed wife is going to have a child.

Not yet anyway, he did later. He gave Joseph time to sweat it out a little bit first. But he goes first to Mary and gave her a chance to sweat it out.

And by the way, sweating it out is pretty much what the reaction of most girls in that society would have been. She was no doubt, since she was as yet unmarried, probably in her early teens, since girls marry quite young then, probably 13 or 14 years old. We don't know her exact age, nor does it matter.

But she was declared to be a virgin. She lived with her father, as would be the custom. And if a girl got pregnant while living at her father's house, if the man who got her pregnant was known, then she would have to marry him.

If the father wouldn't permit the man to marry his daughter, the man would have to give some kind of a dowry, some kind of a payment, what's called the price of a virgin, according to the law, to the father. On the other hand, if the man could not be found, then what? Well, actually this situation is even a little different than that. Because the law of Moses that I just mentioned, where she'd have to get married, was actually only true if she was not betrothed yet.

If a woman was not married or betrothed, and she got pregnant or even had sex with a man, they'd have to get married. Now, of course, in this case, her being forced to get married would only be the case if it was Joseph who got her pregnant, because she was betrothed to him. And if he got her pregnant, it would simply require that they get married, and they planned to anyway.

But Joseph was not the father, and he knew it. And so did other people, soon enough. No doubt.

Some people in the family, anyway. Which means that she was in the category of a woman who was married, even though they had not yet come together, and they were not yet married officially. Once a woman was betrothed, she could not be separated from her betrothed except by a divorce.

It was as binding as marriage. In fact, in some parts of the country, according to, I think, William Barclay, I think it was he from which I got this information, betrothed people even slept together in Judea. It was considered that they were just about the same thing as married.

Although in Galilee, they didn't. The customs were different in Judea and Galilee. In Galilee, people who were betrothed did not sleep together.

They had to wait until they were married. And because of that, of course, Joseph and Mary had not slept together, and when she turned up pregnant, Joseph could hardly think anything but that she had slept with someone else. That put her in the category of a married woman who had had sex with somebody other than her husband and therefore would be regarded as adultery.

Now, whereas the penalty under the law for an unbetrothed virgin sleeping with a guy was simply that she had to marry him, for a married or betrothed girl who commits adultery, the penalty was death. And therefore, the statement that she was going to be found pregnant and Joseph would clearly not be the father would mean that she would be vulnerable to being at least misunderstood, to say the least. And possibly even killed.

How could she persuade her parents? I mean, we accept this story because we're Christians, we live after the fact. The idea of the virgin birth has been, we've heard it ever since childhood. We celebrate Christmas every year, even before we're Christians.

We know about the doctrine of the virgin birth. So it's not so shocking to us to read the story, but think about it. There had never been a virgin birth before, nor did anyone know there was going to be one.

It's true that Isaiah 7, verse 14, it said the virgin will conceive and bring forth a son, but that was, it would seem, interpreted by the Jews prior to this time as understood differently. Very possibly the virgin was seen to refer to Israel itself, which was sometimes called the virgin daughter of Zion. But it's hard to know how the Jews understood it.

It's unlikely that the average Jew really expected, on the basis of that prophecy, that a virgin would have a child, a literal virgin. And even if they believed that one would, who would believe it if their own daughter came and said, I'm the one. Yeah, Dad, I'm pregnant, but hey, don't get bent out of shape, I'm really still a virgin, you know.

Now, we accept that because we know Mary was special. We know she's famous. She's the most famous mother in the world, in history.

But to her parents, she was just their daughter. And she had to somehow explain to them her pregnancy. For her, at the end of this conversation with the angels, said, behold the handmaiden of the Lord, be it unto me as the Lord wills, was really a supreme

act of resignation.

First of all, she must have thought, my parents will never believe me. I'll be viewed as one who's cheated on my husband. I will very probably be stoned to death.

And yet, well, if this pleases God, so be it. So be it unto me. Sort of like Esther, you know, well, if I live or if I die, so what? If I perish, I perish.

I'll do what the will of God is. And so Mary is, although we don't venerate her like the Roman Catholics do, as mother of God or whatever, or some special co-redemptrix with Christ, we do have to acknowledge that she was a woman of unusual consecration, and no doubt, selected for that very purpose. There's no reason in the world to suggest that God chose ordinary people to be the parents of Jesus.

Certainly, He didn't choose ordinary people to be the parents of John the Baptist. They were blameless people. They were extremely, unusually righteous people.

They were part of the believing remnant of Israel at that time. And if God brought John the Baptist to be reared in a family like that, how much more would God be concerned to bring Jesus into a family to be reared by people who were equally godly, if not more so? We have to assume that Joseph and Mary were people of exceptional piety, although they were peasants. They were not priests like Zechariah was.

Joseph had a good pedigree, but that didn't mean anything at that point in history. There were no kings from that line. And he was just a carpenter, a lowly, not very wealthy kind of a guy.

And Mary, no doubt, didn't come from a royal family, except going way back a thousand years from the family of David. But the point is, they must have been exceptional in godliness. And Mary's resignation to this circumstance would be a good example of it, because for all she knew, she might not live out this pregnancy, except by the promise of God that she was going to have a son.

That would be the only hope she'd have of surviving, because she would be, of course, accused. How in the world could she ever hope to convince anybody, especially the family, especially Joseph, that this is happening? Well, she had one ace in the hole, and God had given it to her. Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was a family member. And for six months now, the whole family had been buzzing about the phenomenon of Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy, and the fact that it was claimed that an angel had announced this in advance, and so forth. If anybody would understand Mary's situation, it would be Elizabeth, which is no doubt the reason that we read in verse 39 that Mary arose and went down to visit Elizabeth for a few months until John was born.

Why would she do that? Who in the family would understand her like Elizabeth? Now, see, here's an interesting thing. There was no risk to Elizabeth's getting pregnant. She was married.

She wouldn't be stoned to death. But it was supernatural enough to get everybody's attention who knew her to say, wow, God really is doing amazing things. Look at this woman who was physically incapable of having children.

God has brought forth a significant child. Then when Mary comes along and says, hey, guess what? The same angel came to me and I'm having a child too. That might be fairly hard for the family to stomach, but it wouldn't be hard for Elizabeth to handle.

And if she could get Elizabeth in her corner, Elizabeth could appeal to the family on her behalf. And no doubt that was what Mary had in mind. There's one person she knows who won't misunderstand.

And so she goes down to visit cousin or relative Elizabeth. Now, the angel even reminds her of that. No doubt because Mary was wondering, you know, how am I going to get away with this? And he says, well, remember your relative Elizabeth.

They said she couldn't have a child. Just like a virgin can't have a child. But she has a child now.

Now, the angel said this to her largely to increase her faith. Because she, of course, when she was told that even though she would remain a virgin until the child was born, she would become pregnant without sexual intercourse. That seemed impossible.

And so the angel said, well, there's other things happening that seemed impossible. Remember? Your relative Elizabeth. They said she couldn't have a child.

They said she was barren. And look, now she's six months pregnant. With God, nothing should be called impossible.

And that was in order to help Elizabeth. Now, Zacharias needed a sign to help his faith. And his sign was being struck dumb.

Mary, no doubt, needed a sign to help her faith too, but there was already a sign in Elizabeth's pregnancy that could be pointed to. These people were being asked to believe some pretty incredible things. Remember, the miraculous element had died away with the prophetic spirit 400 years earlier.

The Jews had become accustomed to living a religious life without miracles. We see so many miracles in the New Testament, we might think, well, these people should be ready for miracles. They shouldn't be so surprised when an angel comes and miraculously announces there's going to be a miraculous pregnancy and so forth.

But it's not as if there were miracles happening in that time. There weren't. The last period of miracles for Israel had been during the days of Elijah.

Hundreds of years earlier. And therefore, it would be just as amazing for a woman at that time to be told that even though she's a virgin, she's going to become pregnant, as it would be today for someone to be approached, in fact, more so. Because we do see a few miracles once in a while, but they weren't seeing any at that time and therefore, it was so exceptional that God did give them, both Zechariah and Mary, signs to help encourage them to believe what was told.

Now, I want to just say, we only have a minute or two here, let me say something about the actual message of the angel. Mary doesn't say an awful lot. She points out that she's a virgin and that that doesn't seem to her to jive well with what the angel is saying, that she's going to have a child because virgins don't have children.

Her affirmation that she has never known a man is unequivocal and we can see that Luke is telling us very plainly that Jesus was virgin born by recording this story. But, more important is what the angel said than what Mary said. The angel said that she had found favor with God.

He tells her in verse 31 that she's going to conceive, have a son, his name will be called Jesus. By the way, the angel named him Jesus. He doesn't say why his name will be Jesus here, but in Matthew chapter 1, which we'll study on another occasion, the same angel appeared to Joseph and said his name should be called Jesus because he will save his people from his sins.

The name Jesus means Jehovah is salvation and therefore he was coming to be the Savior, the salvation of his people and therefore his name should be Jesus. Now, it says in verse 32, he will be great, the same thing was said about John the Baptist, that he would be great. However, thereafter the similarity ends.

Jesus will be called the Son of the Highest, which is another way of saying the Son of God. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end. This is a summary of the major lines of Messianic prophecy in the Old Testament.

In fact, every feature of that statement you can find in one single prophecy in Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 9, verses 6 and 7. Isaiah 9, verses 6 and 7 says, For unto us a child is born. An appropriate prophecy for the angel to allude to in talking to Mary about the birth of her son.

Unto us a son is given and the government will be upon his shoulder. His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Now, verse 7, Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end upon the throne of

David and over his kingdom to order and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward even forever.

This child that would be born, it says, would sit upon the throne of David and rule over his kingdom forever. That's what the angel said about Jesus here. The same ideas.

It says, The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He'll reign over the house of Jacob forever. And of his kingdom there will be no end.

Direct paraphrase of Isaiah 9, 6 and 7 which also predicts the birth of the Messiah as the angel was here doing. Now, when Mary said, How can this be? I haven't known a man. The angel gives this answer in verse 35.

The angel answered and said to her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you. The power of the highest will overshadow you. Therefore also the Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.

Now, when he said, The Spirit of God will come upon you and the power of the highest, the power of God will overshadow you. This is how she's going to become pregnant. By a spiritual overshadowing, by a spiritual anointing or miracle that takes place.

In other words, the fact that she does not know a man is not an issue. It's not going to require a man in this case. He's not going to be the son of a man.

He's going to be the Son of God. Therefore, this is how he will be conceived. And therefore, he will be called the Son of God.

I pointed this out before. If you ask, Why was Jesus called the Son of God? The answer many Christians would give is because He was always God the Son. Although the expression God the Son is not found in the Bible.

That is the traditional answer. That Jesus was always the Son of God. But if you ask the angel why Jesus was called the Son of God, he'd say because the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and the power of the highest overshadowed her.

Therefore, that child of hers was called the Son of God. Why was he called the Son of God? Because God was his Father. No man was.

God was the active agent in conception where a man would ordinarily be. And this is not in any sense to be construed in the crass notion of the Mormons who believe that God actually came to her and had sex with her, came to her in a physical form because the Mormons believe that God is a man with a physical body. And they believe that Mary had actual physical sex with God.

However, that doesn't work well because she wouldn't have been a virgin then since they believe God is a man with a body of flesh and bones and they believe he had

intercourse with Mary which is a crass and gross teaching. I mean, it would make God a rapist really. Of course, she submitted, but it would make God a violator of Joseph, of marriage vows and so forth.

I mean, it would make God an adulterer. If it would have been adultery for a woman in her condition to sleep with a man who was not God, why would it not be adultery for her to sleep with a man who claimed to be God? You know? If it was a physical thing, for all she knows, it might be a David Koresh type coming along saying, I'm God. I will overshadow you.

I will come upon you. I will make you pregnant. That is not what took place.

There was no physical thing going on here. She remained a virgin, even afterwards. She was not sexually violated.

And she did not violate, nor did God violate, the covenant relationship she had with Joseph. But it was a spiritual phenomenon, a miracle that took place in her womb. God simply, in some manner, that we could probably never understand, provided that part of the genetic material that was needed to the egg of the woman to produce a child.

Whether He created that genetic material de novo out of thin air, or what, we do not know. But we know that it requires the complement of the male and the female genetic material to create a life. And there must have been some.

Jesus did have chromosomes. And He did have genes. And He got them from somewhere.

Now, we don't have to understand how that took place. There are many people who don't have an easy time believing in miracles, and the virgin birth is one of the hardest things they have to believe in. And I'm sure that Mary had to face that kind of skepticism in her own generation, with her own people.

But as far as we know, she got no further explanation than this. Nor do we. But it shows that Jesus was the Son of God in a very special sense, because God alone was His Father.

Therefore, the genealogy that Luke later gives is that of Mary, and not of a man. Because Luke has emphasized that Jesus was not the Son of a man, but of God. We'll talk about her trip to visit Elizabeth next time, and also the birth of John the Baptist.

And I think the birth of Jesus will come up. Well, yeah, we'll get to that another time. We're taking this in small pieces.