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Luke 1–2

Jesus Comes

IN THESE FIRST TWO CHAPTERS of the gospel, Luke tells of the Holy Spirit’s invasion into the lives of an elderly couple, a young girl, an old man of prayer and a prophetess. The stories of these intimate encounters with God lay the foundation for Luke’s gospel of Jesus Christ.

Here we discover God’s great pleasure in revealing the divine plan to the most humble and lowly of God’s people. We find clues that prepare us for the events that will unfold in later chapters. We, too, encounter the Spirit transforming our simple, common lives into vessels of majesty. Read Luke 1–2.

Find the Facts

Name the main characters in these chapters. What are the major events in these chapters? Where do they occur? To whom does an angel appear? What is the role of angels in these chapters? What was Simeon looking for?

Consistent with his desire to offer an “orderly account,” Luke gives the specific time and place surrounding the birth of John the Baptist. The time (approximately 6 B.C.) is during the latter part of the reign of Herod the Great, who ruled Judea from 37-4 B.C. Luke then introduces a certain priest and his wife (also of the priestly lineage) who live in Judea.

Both Zechariah and Elizabeth are faithful and obedient Jews, but their faithfulness has not been rewarded by the birth of children as would be expected (Ps. 128:3-4). Like Sarah (GEN. 16:1-2) and Hannah (1 SAM. 1:2) before her, Elizabeth was barren. That both Zechariah and Elizabeth are “getting on in years” only underscores the impossibility of pregnancy and emphasizes God’s providence in the birth that does finally take place.

Centuries earlier, King David had organized the priesthood of Israel into different divisions (1 CHR. 24:1-3). Each division of priests was to take part, in turn, in the service of the temple in Jerusalem. While on duty, it fell by lot to Zechariah to enter the inner sanctuary of the temple to burn incense and to invoke the presence of God on behalf of the people, in this case a sizeable crowd.

Was Zechariah’s prayer a personal plea that he and Elizabeth might be blessed with a child? Or was his prayer a more general invocation on behalf of all the people of God? Either way, God answers Zechariah’s prayer directly and dramatically by sending Gabriel, an angel of the Lord. The angel comes to announce the birth of Zechariah’s son, a gift from God, and to describe John’s future role in God’s saving work:

- By never drinking “wine or strong drink,” John will live a life similar to that of a Nazarite—one set apart especially for the service of the Lord (NUM. 6:2-5; JG. 13:4-7).
- John will be “filled with the Holy Spirit,” and his life, from its inception in the womb, is the initiative and work of God.
- John will play a prophetic role in the life of his people, recalling them to their God. The references to Elijah suggest that John is the expected messenger who will prepare the way for God’s judgment (MAL. 3:1, 4:5-6).

5. What similarities can you identify between Zechariah and Elizabeth and the people of Israel? between Zechariah and Elizabeth and the Church today?

Luke 1:26-38

In Luke 1:26-38, commonly referred to as “the annunciation,” the scene shifts from Elizabeth and Zechariah to Mary, and Luke focuses on the next step in God’s unfolding plan of salvation. As in the account of the promise of John, Luke emphasizes the reality of God working actively and concretely in human lives. Gabriel’s appearance to Mary is located at a specific time (the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy) and in a specific place (Nazareth).

Unlike his description of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Luke makes no reference to Mary or Joseph’s faithfulness. Mary is simply “favored,” the recipient of divine grace. Engaged to Joseph, Mary is legally incorporated into the lineage of David, the one from whose line the Messiah was expected to come (Is. 9:7). Like Zechariah, Mary is disturbed by Gabriel’s appearance, but rather than doubting, she responds in wonder and openness to God’s approach.

As before, Gabriel continues his revelation by describing the role that Jesus will play in God’s work of redemption. After naming the child, the angel extends the process of “naming” by offering a glimpse of Jesus’ future.

Jesus will be called “Son of the Most High” and “Son of God,” titles given to the hoped-for Messiah (2 SAM. 7:14). God will give Jesus the

“throne of his ancestor David,” and his reign will be endless. Thus he is to be the messianic king foretold by the prophets (Is. 9:6-7; DAN. 7:14; MIC. 4:7), and he will be sovereign in the kingdom that God is establishing.

When Mary wonders how this will come to pass, reasoning that she is still unmarried, Gabriel describes the miraculous nature of Jesus’ conception; it will be by the Holy Spirit. Rather than explaining the “how” of the virgin birth, the angel focuses on the consequences of the Spirit’s work in conception:

- Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Jesus will be the Son of God literally—not holy and divine in title only but in nature also.
- Born of Mary, Jesus will also be human. His birth is not simply an act of God affecting human history but God’s entering into human history in flesh and blood.
- Described as being “overshadowed” by the Holy Spirit, Jesus’ conception recalls images of creation (GEN. 1:2) and of re-creation (EZEK. 37:14) and suggests that Jesus will be manifest God’s creation and redemption.

The angel also gives Mary a sign. Her elderly, barren relative, Elizabeth, now awaits the birth of her child. That which seemed impossible comes to pass by the power and grace of God.

Mary’s response is one of self-surrender and abandonment to the will of God. “Let it be with me according to your word,” she says. By her willingness, Mary becomes one in whom the Christ is born. Her posture of openness and cooperation in the face of God’s loving and gracious advances is the essential attitude of all discipleship.

Luke 1:39-56

Here Luke begins to link the separate events taking place in the lives of Mary and Elizabeth. In the course of Mary's extended visit with her older relative, the gradually unfolding stories of John and Jesus paint a breathtaking picture of God's answers to prayer. Mary and Elizabeth testify to one another of the fulfillment of God's promises.

Upon meeting Mary, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps, and Elizabeth spontaneously cries out. Luke describes her response as the outward expression of the movement of the Holy Spirit within her. As a result, she identifies Mary as the mother of her Lord (1 COR. 12:3), thus confirming the words of Gabriel (1:35). Elizabeth also describes her own experience as one of joy, thus anticipating the joy that will come to others because of Jesus.

Most significantly, however, Elizabeth points to Mary as a model of faith. Twice Elizabeth calls Mary "blessed," for Mary has believed the word that has been spoken to her from God. In his adult life, Jesus too recognizes that Mary's blessedness does not lie primarily in her role as Jesus' human mother, but in her willingness to believe the word that had been given to her from God (11:27-28).

Mary responds to Elizabeth's delight with a hymn commonly known as "The Magnificat" (1:46-55)—so titled because of the first word in its Latin translation. Also called the "Song of Mary," this hymn of praise parallels Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving (1 SAM. 2:1-10) and recalls the hymn of deliverance sung by the people of God at the Red Sea (EX. 15:1-18).

In the first part of the song, Mary gives voice to her own experience of God's grace. Written in the first person, these verses focus on God's actions toward Mary. For Mary, the deliverance of the lowly—now literally acted out in her life—is God's "name" (PHIL. 2:5-11).

The second part of her song points to the universal implications of Mary's experience. As God has acted toward Mary, exalting her lowliness, so too will God act toward others in the birth of Jesus. God's deliverance equalizes all human relationships (Is. 40:4-5). God's deliverance brings hope and salvation to the people of God (Is. 61:1-3), fulfilling God's covenant with Israel (GEN. 12:1-3).

Consider

9. Read 1 Samuel 2:1-10 and compare Mary's song to Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving. What emotions and attitudes are common to both hymns? What do these songs teach you about God's values? God's ways?

10. When have you experienced the "lowliness" of Mary? How has God responded?

11. Reread 1:51-53. In the world today, where can you see God exalting the humble, scattering the proud and sending the rich away empty?

Luke 1:57-80

In this account of John's birth, Luke emphasizes the fulfillment of God's promises. In keeping with their faithfulness and obedience, Zechariah and Elizabeth have the child circumcised on the eighth day according to Jewish custom, and they name him John according to God's instruction. Zechariah now speaks, and all these events cause fear to fall on others. Word spreads, people begin to talk, clearly recognizing "the hand of the Lord" at work, and they wonder who John will become. For Luke, God's future is now unfolding.

As implied earlier (1:14), the birth of John is not only a blessing to Zechariah and Elizabeth individually but also to others collectively. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Zechariah's hymn speaks of the fulfillment of God's covenant with Israel and the restoration of God's people. The "mighty savior" refers to a messianic king. That God is "raising up" such salvation for deliverance from Israel's enemies points not only to God's actions in the past (JG. 2:16) but also recalls God's promises for the future (DT. 18:18; ACTS 3:22).

Speaking as a prophet, Zechariah's words echo those of the Old Testament prophets. John's birth demonstrates God's faithfulness (MIC. 7:20). As one called to prepare the way of the Lord, John is the forerunner of the Messiah (IS. 40:3; MAL. 3:1). The coming visitation of God will bring light to God's people, thus restoring Israel as the prophet Isaiah proclaimed (IS. 60:1-3).

Zechariah's hymn directly focuses on the infant John, thus underscoring Luke's belief that God works salvation concretely in human lives. The promise of the ages has come. God's faithfulness can now be seen and held.

Luke notes that Joseph is of the “house and family of David” and that he and Mary travel to Bethlehem, “city of David.” Thus the prophecies concerning the origin of God’s Messiah come true (MIC. 5:2).

The manger in which Mary lays the baby is a trough used to hold food for animals. She uses it in lieu of a guest room in the crowded city. Luke, however, does not elaborate on the birth itself, implying that Jesus’ birth was like any other normal human birth that took place in surroundings of simplicity and poverty.

Compared to the plainness of the birth narrative, the story of the shepherds is filled with drama. Here again an angel comes to make an announcement. A great company of angels accompanies the messenger, and the shepherds around Bethlehem who receive the proclamation respond first in fear, then in curiosity, then in great joy.

The narrative builds on three key terms: “good news,” “great joy” and “glory.” David was a shepherd near Bethlehem (1 SAM. 16:4-13, 17:15), and the prophet Micah describes the Messiah as a shepherd who will feed the flock of Israel (MIC. 5:4). Because of their constant duties to the flocks, shepherds were generally unable to keep the ceremonial laws of cleanliness and lived on the fringes of society. To these people—the lowly and outcast—the angels reveal the glory of the Lord and first announce the good news of great joy. God’s salvation, now incarnate (2:11), will extend to all people, great and small.

As with Zechariah and Mary, the angel gives a sign to the shepherds, but here the sign is Jesus himself, a sign that merits a dramatic vision of the fullness of God’s glory. A “multitude of the heavenly host” appears and the joining of heaven and earth—of God and humankind—is proclaimed at Jesus’ birth (REV. 21:3).

For Luke, the shepherds are eyewitness of the good news. When they reach Bethlehem, they not only see the things that have been made known to them, they also make known to others the things that they have seen and heard. In keeping with her character, Mary listens but remains open to the will of God as it will continue to be revealed. And as the story began with the glory of the Lord appearing to the shepherds, it ends with the shepherds glorifying God in return.

Consider

14. What are the implications of Jesus' simple birth to the lives of his followers today?

15. If Luke were alive today, who would he identify as the "shepherds" through whom the good news is revealed?

16. Consider the appearances of angels in these chapters. What do you think is the role of angels in contemporary life? (Read Heb. 1:14.)

Luke 2:21-52

Besides Luke's description of the wonder of the shepherds, he also tells of the reactions of other people, including Mary and Joseph. These stories of Jesus' infancy and childhood confirm what has already been foretold and continue to point to the future as it unfolds.

Luke particularly emphasizes the obedience of Mary and Joseph. According to the Jewish custom, Jesus is circumcised eight days after his birth, and he is named following the instructions of the angel. Mary and Joseph fulfill other obligations "according to the law of Moses" as well. Because Jesus is the first-born son, they present him in the temple to be consecrated to God (Ex. 13:2, 12). Mary also offers a sacrifice as required for her purification after childbirth (Lev. 12:2-8). That she offers "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons" indicates that she was too poor to afford a lamb for sacrifice.

As Mary and Joseph fulfill the obligations of the law in the temple, they meet Simeon. Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon is a faithful and upright man. Filled with the Holy Spirit and awaiting the deliverance of God's people, he is forward-looking. He is also the recipient of a special revelation from God that he himself will see the Messiah before dying.

His response to the infant is found in a hymn of praise called the "Song of Simeon" in which he proclaims that he has seen the Christ, the Messiah, and that his purpose in the service of God is now fulfilled. He, like Zechariah and Mary, recognizes that this salvation is the fulfillment of Israel's hope as God's chosen people (Is. 60:1-3). Simeon also understands that this salvation is extended through Israel to all people and has universal scope (Is. 49:6, 52:10, 55:5, 60:3-6). The child he now sees and holds embodies all these hopes.

Simeon then delivers a private message to Mary, telling her indirectly of the suffering that she will come to experience as her joy is turned to sorrow. He also indicates that Jesus will become one through whom God's judgment and grace—"the falling and the rising of many"—is accomplished (Mic. 7:8). The prophetess Anna reinforces Simeon's words and confirms his insight.

Bracketed between two general references to Jesus' growth, the only story in scripture concerning Jesus' childhood is found in Luke 2:41-51. The story takes place during the feast of the Passover, one of three major festivals during which the faithful would make pilgrimages to Jerusalem (Ex. 23:14-17, 34:23).

Sometimes entire villages would travel together, and in the confusion of the crowds, Mary and Joseph lose track of Jesus. They find him sitting in the temple, demonstrating both a thirst for religious knowledge and exceptional wisdom for a boy of twelve. He explains to his anxious parents that he is where he belongs—"in my Father's house."

The story offers but a brief glimpse into the developing identity of Jesus. Obedient to his parents, he returns with them to Nazareth. Mary continues to await the unfolding of God's will as she cares for Jesus in silence for the next twenty years.

Consider

17. How does Simeon describe God's salvation? What does this suggest to you about the work and mission of the Church?

18. What do you think it means to say that Jesus is a “sign that will be opposed” (2:34)?

Group Activities

1. Divide into two groups and assign one group the story of Sarah (GEN. 16:1, 17:15-21, 18:1-15, 21:1-7) and the other group the story of Hannah (1 SAM. 1:1-2:11). Ask each group to read the account of the childless woman and compare her story to Elizabeth’s. Ask group members to use the following questions in their discussions:
 - How are the personalities of the two women similar or dissimilar?
 - How are the circumstances similar or dissimilar?
 - How are God’s actions similar or dissimilar?
 - What conclusions can you draw about God’s grace?

Invite the two groups to share their findings with one another.

2. On chalkboard or newsprint, make two columns and label one *Jesus* and the other *John*. Together list each man’s qualities and tasks in the appropriate columns. Discuss:
 - In what ways are the two men alike?
 - In what ways is Jesus far greater?
 - In what ways will John prepare the way for Jesus?
 - In what ways has God equipped John for this role?

3. Ask group members each to choose one of the two hymns, Mary's (1:46-55) or Zechariah's (1:67-79). Distribute drawing paper and crayons or colored pencils. Ask group members to reread their chosen hymn, choose one image from that hymn that especially speaks to them, and illustrate it.

Allow time for work; then invite group members to share their illustrations and to explain the significance of their choice.

4. Divide into three groups and assign one of the following characters to each group: Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary. Ask each group to answer the following questions:
 - Describe this character (personality, virtues, weaknesses, etc.).
 - In what ways did this character change through the events of these chapters?
 - Describe this character's relationship with God.
 - How are you like or unlike this character?

Journal Meditation

Reread Mary's song of joy, the Magnificat (1:46-55). Review your answers to question 9. Reflect for a few moments on your experiences of God and write or illustrate your own Magnificat in the space below.

Stepstone To Prayer

Lord, give me Mary's simple confidence in your goodness. Let it be to me according to your word ...