
“Prepare the Way for the Lord”

Luke 1:1-25

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Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us,² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.⁶ Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly.⁷ But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

⁸ Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God,⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.¹³ But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

¹⁹ The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home.²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.²⁵ “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

Even though the Advent season doesn't begin until next week, I thought we'd get started a week early. In order to preach through Luke's Advent narrative by Christmas we're going to need five weeks.

I think we all know that Christmas is going to be different this year, a lot different, but I think this is a great opportunity for us to get to the heart of Christmas and to simplify Christmas and not get caught up in all the commercialism of Christmas. Christmas, as we know, is about Jesus Christ. He is God who became man. The uncreated one became created. God became one of us. He did so in order to identify with us. He came to be our perfect Saviour. You see, because of sin, there exists a great divide between God and each one of us. Because of sin, every human being is relationally separated from God. So, God made a way, a perfect way through a perfect Saviour. He is the perfect mediator in that he possessed both natures. He is fully divine. He is God. And at the same time, in his coming, he took on the nature of a man, he became fully human. Two natures in one being to be for us the perfect mediator and Saviour.

Because of time, I'm going to skip the introduction and get into the main section of this text, which begins in verse 5. Luke here is setting the stage for the grand entrance of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, with his miraculous birth and angelic announcement. But before Jesus arrives on the scene, there is one who must come before him. Before we learn about the birth of Jesus, we first learn about the birth of the one who is to prepare the way for Jesus, not only in his birth, but also in his ministry. John's birth came before Jesus and John's ministry began before Jesus. In both ways, he is preparing the way for the Lord.

We learn that there was a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, who were godly people, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. Even though they were incredibly pious, they could not have children, and now they were very old, beyond the age to conceive. Who does that remind you of? Abraham and Sarah. They too were very old. They too were physically beyond the age to have children. We know what God did for them. So already, as we read this story, there is a sense of anticipation. Who is this old couple and what's their part in the story?

Zechariah was a priest and it was his turn to carry out his priestly duties, and the text says that he was chosen by lot. Now we can look at that and say that he was chosen by chance. It was like the roll of the dice. But the Christian must never say that. Proverbs tells us:

Prov. 16:33 The lot is cast into the lap,
but its every decision is from the LORD.

It wasn't by chance that Zechariah's turn came up. No, it was God acting sovereignly, who chose Zechariah to be the one that that would carry out the priestly duties that day. God is always in control. God is carrying out his plan to prepare the way for his anointed king.

As Zechariah was in the temple, the angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. The angel is God's messenger, one that is tasked by God to carry out His assignments. Later, we find out that the angel is named Gabriel. Now, whenever an angel appears, we know that something special is going on, but it has been close to 500 years since the last angel appeared. It was to the prophet who had the same name, Zechariah, 480 years before the coming of Christ.

The last prophet was Malachi and he lived around 400 years before Christ, so here is this priest named Zechariah, carrying out his priestly duties, in the temple, near the altar of incense and he encounters an angel of God. Zechariah was to carry out this priestly assignment alone. He would not have expected to find anyone else in there. A common layperson would not have been permitted in. Only the priest was allowed, but to see an angel? Luke was right to say that he was 'startled and was gripped with fear.'

How then does the angel of God respond? As they often do when they reveal themselves to humans, he says, "Do not be afraid." The angel then says, "Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John." What was the prayer that Zechariah prayed? At first glance we might be led to believe that it was a prayer for fertility, a prayer for a child, especially since that's the very next thing that comes out of the angel's mouth. "Your prayer has been heard. Your wife will bear you a son." However, it's highly unlikely that that was the prayer to which the angel was referring. They were already past the age of having children. It's very unlikely that they would have continued to pray that they would be able to conceive a child. As well, the priest, if he is faithfully carrying out his priestly duties, then he would not be praying for personal prayer requests while carrying out his duties in the temple. As a priest, he is a mediator. He's at the altar in the holy of holies. It would be like someone at our church who's assigned to pray the Sunday congregational prayer, and all he does is pray for his own needs and requests. That would be very strange.

As well, the altar of incense was one of the various fixtures that were in the most holy place in the temple of God. It was the job of the priest to keep the incense burning. The incense represented the prayers of the people of God. It was his job to keep that incense burning, but also, on the Day of Atonement the priest would enter the Holy of Holies and sprinkle blood on the altar and also on the altar of incense, to show that it's only by the shedding of blood that the sins of people can be forgiven.

Therefore, if he's praying about anything, he's praying as a priest, for the people of Israel. He's praying, "Restore your people, O God. Redeem your people, O God. Forgive your people, O God. Save your people, O God." Those would have been the prayers he would have prayed.

I could just imagine that after the final book of the Old Testament was written and the last prophet had passed away, and they were no longer hearing words and messages from God. Centuries went by, without a peep from God, world powers came and went, but the prayers of the people would have been constantly going up for centuries. Prayers for the consolation and restoration of Israel. I'm sure many of the prayers were about the promises that God had made. Lord, send the king, you promised to David. Lord, restore to us the Land, you promised to Abraham. Lord, send the great prophet that you promised through Moses. Those prayers must have been filled with great longing for the Advent, for the coming of God's special redeemer.

Thus, the prayer that the angel said was now answered, is not first and foremost, the prayer for a child to an old couple; rather, the answer is to his prayers as a priest of the people of God. It's the answer to the prayers for deliverance and consolation and restoration and healing and the fulfilling of God's ancient promises. So, it's not the answer to receive a child, but the answer is in what this child will do, it's in who this child will be.

As a related application, let this remind you to pray prayers beyond our little worlds and beyond our personal needs. Remember how Jesus taught us to pray. There were the personal prayers. Daily bread, sins forgiven, temptation averted, but there were also prayers like this. Your Kingdom come; your will be done on earth. As God's people, we are a kingdom of priests, and as priests, let's pray those kinds of prayers.

Now let's look into this child who is to be named John. What will he do? Six things. Let's take a closer look:

- **He will cause many to rejoice because of his birth.**

Why will that be the case? Sure, it'll be because he was born to a couple that was way past their fertile years. He was indeed a miracle child. But it has to be more than that. It's because of his mission and his ministry. It has to be because, John is the first sign, that God has broken his silence, that after 400 years God is about to do his greatest work. You see, we need to have that perspective too. Have you ever looked at those images of a bunch of multi colored dots on the page. Someone hands you the image and asks, what do you see? And you say, I see a bunch of multi-colored dots. But the friend says, keep looking. But you say, I don't see anything. And then he says, there's a dinosaur. Look for the dinosaur. But as hard are you try, all you can see are dots. Then he says, look beyond the dots or unfocus your eyes, and then slowly, the image appears, and after you see it, you can't unsee it anymore. That's what this is like. We can look at the miracle and marvel at the miracle, an old couple has had a baby. But in doing so, all we're seeing are the dots. When we look beyond the baby, and ask, why was he born, what's he all about? Then we begin to see the image, we see what was meant to be seen. What was hidden is now revealed. Then we truly rejoice, that God is back, and He is on the move.

- **Second, He will be great in the sight of the Lord.**

The measure of his greatness will not be according to worldly standards. He won't live in royalty. He won't be riding around in a fancy vehicle. He won't even be wearing expensive clothes. He won't have wealth or political power. He won't be a successful and influential artist or businessman. Rather, he will live the life of an ascetic, a life of self-denial. He will live out in the wilderness. He will wear clothing made out of camel's hair with just a leather belt around his waist. His food will be locusts and wild honey. He will be a person who for his entire life will be lived in service to the Lord. We know that because the angel told his father that he will never take wine or fermented drink, that is, alcoholic drink. This was part of the conditions of the Nazirite vow which is mentioned in Numbers 6. The word Nazirite just means, dedication or consecration. But in Numbers it was for a limited time and the vow would be over. The Apostle Paul took a Nazirite vow for a period, during his ministry. But for John, his entire life was to be lived like a Nazirite.

John, as we know, boldly preached the word of God, like all the prophets of old. He never feared the religious establishment. He called all people to repent. He called out Herod for his sin and that resulted in his imprisonment and his execution. He died a martyr for God. For these things, for this kind of life, he was considered great in the sight of God. Even Jesus said,

(Matthew 11:11) Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

What about for each of us? In whose sight do you want to be considered great? Do you want to be considered great because of your beautiful appearance, or your education and intelligence, or because you came from wealth, or because you created your own wealth, or because you have smart children, who are pursuing successful careers? These are not bad things, but they are not great things. Most important of all is to be considered great in the sight of God, because regardless of the stage or position you are in, you are living your life for God. That's what makes a great life. That was John.

- **Third, He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.**

Now this is really astonishing. Here is the only person in the entire Bible that is said to have been filled with Holy Spirit before he was born. But it's also astonishing in that the Holy Spirit had not yet been sent upon the Church. That event was known as Pentecost. But here, we have John, the one who will be great in the sight of the Lord, who will also be filled with the Holy Spirit. All of God's prophets of old were under the influence of the Spirit when they spoke. Peter tells us that in 2 Peter 1:21:

(2 Peter 1:21) For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Moses was endued with the Spirit of God. And it was said of the prophets who were under Moses, that the Spirit also rested on them. Even Balaam the wicked prophet for hire, when he uttered blessings rather than curses on God's people, was under the power of the Spirit when he did so. But never, ever, was there one like John who was filled with the Holy Spirit while he was still in his mother's womb.

- **Fourth, He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.**

Could there be a greater assignment than this? What greater thing can a person be involved in than to draw people back to God? This is the most important task for any person, for all of us. You know, many say that the greatest prophet of the Old Testament was Isaiah. As great as he was, do you know what his message was? It was this:

6:9 He said, "Go and tell this people:

“ ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’
¹⁰ Make the heart of this people calloused;
make their ears dull
and close their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”

It was a message of the deafening of ears, of the blinding of eyes, and the hardening of hearts. God was telling Isaiah, they won't listen to you, but go warn them anyway. They'll hate you for saying what you say but say it anyway. You'll have little to no response but do it anyway. However, that was not the ministry of John. He was going to be God's instrument to bring many people back to God. Mark's gospel tells us,

Mark 1:5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

How do people come back to God? Repentance, confessing their sins and being washed. The same is true today. Do you want to come to God? Then you have to repent, turn from your sin and have them washed by Jesus Christ. You can do that right now, today.

- **Fifthly, He will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents (literally Fathers) to their children.** Now what is this all about? What's this about the spirit and power of Elijah? Well, to understand that, we have to go back to the Old Testament. We don't have the time to say everything that can be said about Elijah, but we know that he was one of the mightiest prophets of God, known especially for two things. His stand against the prophets of Baal and that he didn't die but was taken up directly to heaven. We can read about that in 2 Kings 2:11.

(2 Kings 2:11) As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.

- Then if we were to look for the last time Elijah is mentioned in the Old Testament, it's actually in the last two verses of the last chapter of the last book of the Old Testament, the prophecy of Malachi. Listen to how the Old Testament ends:

(Malachi 4:5) "See, I will send the prophet **Elijah** to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."

The Old Testament ends with a promise that Elijah will return. And even here he is the predecessor to the coming of the Lord. Before the great day of the judgment of God, Elijah will come. And what will Elijah do, when he does come? He will change the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents. This is the same thing that's said of John the Baptist. "He will bring many people back to God and in the spirit and power of Elijah, he will turn the hearts of parents to their children," just like it was prophesied by Malachi.

The first thing to note is that the birth of John is the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. John is the one who came in the spirit and power of Elijah. Jesus made that crystal clear in Matthew 11:14 when he said regarding John, "he is the **Elijah** who was to come."

Then, what's this about fathers and children? Well, what is it that turns fathers and children away from each other? What is it that tears family relationships apart? What is it that destroys the first thing that God created, that is the family? It's sin.

We all know that from the Genesis account, but we also know that in our own life experiences. Many of us have or have had damaged family relationships. Others may have what looks like irreparable family relationships. All of that is due to sin. But what will God do through the second Elijah, through John the Baptist, and especially through the one for whom he is coming? He is going to restore families. I find it just amazing that that's the final promise of the Old Testament, and that's the first thing mentioned in the New Testament. God loves families. God loves your family and he loves the family known as the church. Luke is telling us that hearts are going to be changed. Hearts that have been hardened by sin will be changed. So much so that relationships that appeared lost forever, will be once again restored.

I am a living testimony to that. Before I became a Christian in university, I was at such odds with my father. Oh, I can even say that I hated him, with passion and vitriol. And then God saved me. He changed my heart, and helped me to forgive my father, and pray for my father, and accept my father, and love my father and be in a restored relationship with him. That's something only God can do, because it requires the transformation of the heart. I'm sure many of you have similar stories of the powerful work of God in your heart, and in your families too. This is what John came to prepare us for. In the coming of John was the beginning of, undoing the devastation of sin upon the family that first began in the Garden.

- Finally, in transforming hearts, in preaching about sin and confession and repentance, in preaching about the One who will come, whose sandals he's not even worthy to untie, **He is going to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.** How about your heart? Are you ready to meet the Lord? The only way we can be ready is if our sin is dealt with. If we repent of our sins before God and receive the one for which was sent, we will be ready for the Lord.

People of God, just think about it. If John is this great, and great he is, then how much greater is the one for whom he's preparing the way? How amazing must this person be who is called "the Lord," to have someone as great as John as his opening act. And to meet that person, we'll have to wait until next week.

Let's pray.