

LUKE—WEEK 1

GABRIEL ANNOUNCES THE CHRIST



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is The Angel Appears to Zacharias
by Alexander Ivanov (1806–1858) on display at Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow*

Zechariah and Mary both get good news, but Zechariah doubts Gabriel's word.

Zechariah gets a lesson in how to talk to angels.

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Thank you.

Luke 1:1–33 — Gabriel Announces the Christ
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1 Luke 1:1–4 (ESV)

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

Take a moment to let the enormity of this passage sink in. Luke is the foremost author in the New Testament. The books of Luke and Acts together (formerly known as “The History of Christian Origins”) are longer than all of Paul’s writings. Here begins the greatest story ever told in its most complete version.

Luke is inspired, literally, *to write an orderly account for you*, that would add to the many other attempts *to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us*. As someone who has *followed all things closely for some time past*, Luke feels obligated to weigh in with his perspective.

He does this so *that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught*. There’s a hint of concern here about those other narratives. Luke seems to be trying to fill in some gaps.

To put it bluntly, Luke realized that he knew some things that he hadn’t seen covered in the other accounts and he felt compelled to get that knowledge out there where it could do some good.

Thank God he did. Imagine the Bible without the book of Acts.

We don’t know who this book was written to. Theophilus is Greek for “lover of God.” There were real people with that name in the first century, so it may refer to one of them.

But it seems more likely that Theophilus just refers to anyone who loves God.

It’s addressed to you.

What a wonder it is that we have this book (and the rest of scripture) preserved for us by the labor of countless scribes. As great as Luke’s effort was to put this all down, those who copied it did even more.

Just as God called Luke to write this, He also called many people to be human copiers. Imagine deciding to devote your life to copying the Bible. It’s lonely work. Your hand aches. No one thanks you. The copies you make may rot to dust in a century or two, or could be destroyed any number of ways.

But you are part of one of the greatest enterprises in human history. No scientist, no general, no king will have an impact on human history anywhere near as significant or important as what you’re a part of.

Those incredible saints kept God’s word alive through the ages.

It’s amazing that so many were inspired to do so much for so little reward.

2 Luke 1:5–18a (ESV)

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will 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, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this?”

Angels are scary. Every time the Bible recounts people seeing an angel, they're terrified and the angel has to calm them down (like with the shepherds when angels announced the birth of the Christ).

And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not.” — Luke 2:9–10a

But Zechariah's encounter with the angel is even scarier. He's alone in the holy part of the temple, having been chosen by lot to offer incense. The angel really gives him a start. So, he begins by saying, “*Do not be afraid.*” He then gives Zechariah the best news imaginable.

But *Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this?”* Oops! The problem is that he isn't wondering about the mechanics of how this will happen (which is what Mary will wonder about later); he's questioning the truthfulness of the angel. The NIV renders his question as, “*How can I be sure of this?*”

Zechariah is a man of God, but he's about to get one of the all-time great attitude adjustments.

Zechariah has been asking the Lord to take away his wife's barrenness. God heard his prayer and will grant his request. Zechariah is greatly blessed.

People expect life to go a certain way, but it rarely does. Part of growing in Christ is learning to accept Him as Lord. This means relinquishing control over what happens next. The funny thing is that He has control anyway. This is really all about being comfortable with that arrangement.

That's what it means to “accept” Jesus as Lord.

3 Luke 1:18–19 (NKJV)

And Zacharias 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 bring you these glad tidings.

Notice that Gabriel doesn’t detail how an old couple can produce a child. That’s not what Zechariah asked about. Zechariah asked, “*How shall I know this?*”—In other words, “How can I know that you’re telling me the truth?”

Gabriel’s answer is magnificently logical. “*I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God.*”

Remember Isaiah’s experience with standing in the presence of God?

So I said: “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The Lord of hosts.” — Isaiah 6:5 (NKJV)

Isaiah is desperate when he says, “*Woe is me, for I am undone!*” He’s literally disintegrating.

And why is that? Because he’s *a man of unclean lips*. Just as Moses couldn’t see God’s face and live, Isaiah is too sinful to stand in the presence of God without coming undone.

But that’s not a problem for Gabriel; he stands in the presence of God regularly. It’s the ultimate lie-detector test, and Gabriel passes it with flying colors.

And Zechariah totally gets this. Gabriel is saying, “You couldn’t stand in the presence of God for five seconds. I do it all the time.”

Zechariah is a true man of God and he has been chosen for an important role. Yet here he displays some surprising cluelessness.

Were all like Zechariah. The problem with Zechariah, and with us, is not being able to adjust our plans in the light of God’s direction. Unfortunately, people with a lot of initiative often get grand ideas rolling without leaving room for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

It’s great to make plans, but we need to expect major changes and redirections. God has plans too, and our job is to adjust our plans to conform to His—not find a way to preserve our plans in light of current events. We get too attached to our dreams.

One of the great thrills of being a Christian can be seeing God mess with our plans. Sometimes He just blesses them, but more often He closes some doors and opens others. If we play along with these “plot twists” we’ll be able to look back years later and marvel at the way God choreographed things.

This can be thrilling, but it does take some getting used to.

4 Luke 1:19–25 (ESV)

And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.” And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”

As great as Zechariah and Elizabeth are in the kingdom of heaven (which is pretty great), we see here some serious error on their part. Gabriel strikes Zechariah dumb for not believing him. This is for a purpose; he needs to have this seared into his memory. Gabriel points out specifically that this occurs “because you did not believe my words.” Zechariah now has nine months to think about that.

Notice Elizabeth’s error too. She is grateful that God has taken away her *reproach among people*. That’s not unexpected but still sinful and petty. The news that Gabriel has delivered is infinitely more significant than Elizabeth’s popularity. She’s missing the point.

If you were a friend of Zechariah’s, what would you be praying for? If you were Zechariah, what would your prayers (and prayer requests) be? Might they be way off the mark?

We might be praying for Zechariah’s speech to be restored. Wrong! Or for Elizabeth’s pregnancy to go smoothly. Wrong, but reasonable. Or for Gabriel’s prophesy to come true. Silly, but you’re getting warmer. Or for Zechariah and Elizabeth to be strengthened for what’s coming next. Bingo!

Gabriel’s prophesy is certifiably true. This is going to happen. But John is going to be a piece of work. Zechariah and Elizabeth need prayers and they need help. Both are about to show up.

We all have prayers that we can’t shake—the ones that are always on our minds even when we’re not praying. But are we asking for the right things? How would we even know?

Here’s a suggestion. Pick something that’s been weighing on your soul and commit to a full half-hour of prayer for that one thing. (It’s okay if it’s about you.)

Over a longer prayer time, the Spirit will have a greater chance to redirect your prayers. Let this happen. The subject may even change, and you’ll find yourself praying about something else. In the end, you’ll be exhausted, but wondrous things may have happened.

Write down where God led you. Save your notes; they will amaze you some day.

Intense prayer is different.

5 Luke 1:26–33 (ESV)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And 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 bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to 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 one of the most powerful moments in human history. Gabriel says, *"Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"* This throws Mary for a loop. *But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.* The Greek word that's translated, "troubled," (διεταράχθη, dietarachthay) can mean troubled or confused. Here it's both, as she's trying to figure out what it might mean, while Gabriel feels compelled to say, *"Do not be afraid."*

Consider Mary's emotional state for a moment. She's not the least bit wealthy. She's betrothed to a good man (and is surely excited about it), but it's just going to be a typical small town wedding and marriage. Her life up to this point has been as plain as anything you can imagine. If her life had a color, it would be beige.

Then Gabriel shows up and the fireworks start. The word that's translated as "favored" actually means "full of grace." God is filling her with His grace. She's confused and has no idea what to make of it.

So Gabriel fills in the astonishing details. She's been chosen to bear the true king—the one who will rule forever. *He will be called the Son of the Most High.* The wait for the Messiah is over, and she's been picked for a leading role in redemptive history.

I hope she was sitting down.

Good news can actually be hard on people. Notice how many of the things in the Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale are positive events.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holmes_and_Rahe_stress_scale

Somehow, they forgot to include "bearing the Messiah" on their list—not to mention "watching Him be crucified." Even "seeing an angel" would be off the charts.

Our stress may not be like Mary's, but it still counts. If someone you know gets hit with really big good news, be aware that they need friends almost as much as someone who got hit with really bad news.

In either case, we need to be there for them—and not just for a day or two either.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Consider the jobs in your church that people rarely get praised for (e.g. cleaning, preparing communion, changing diapers in the nursery). What would happen if these jobs didn't get done?

2. Why are people so afraid of angels?

3. Do you sometimes have a bad attitude about good news, refusing to believe it?

4. Have you ever written your prayers down and reviewed them later?

5. Have you seen someone struggle with good news?