

## WEEK ONE

### *Setting the Stage: The Prophecies and the Hope*

It has been said that Luke begins his Gospel like a good Shakespearean play: with a pair of minor characters who prepare the way for the lead roles to take the stage. Before the main drama surrounding Joseph, Mary, and Jesus begins, the first scene in the Gospel of Luke introduces us to an important supporting cast: Zechariah and Elizabeth, an older Jewish couple who are about to be caught up into God's plan of salvation in a way they probably never imagined.

Zechariah and Elizabeth stand out as a couple with high credentials in first-century Judaism. With Zechariah serving as a priest, and his wife also coming from the priestly family of Aaron, they would hold a position of great respect. Luke, furthermore, goes out of his way to emphasize that they are both "righteous before God" and even "blameless" in following all God's commands.

That is why the next statement would be so shocking to Jewish minds: "But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years" (Luke 1:7). Barrenness was often considered shameful in Judaism. It was even seen in some cases as evidence of God's punishment (see Deuteronomy 28:15, 18). So this statement introduces us to a tension between this couple's

holiness on one hand and their childlessness on the other. Elizabeth waits for God to act in her life. And the reader of Luke's Gospel also waits to see how this tension will be resolved.

The Gospel of Matthew starts in a very different way. Matthew begins the story of Jesus with a long genealogy. It seems like the dullest of introductions: a list of forty-seven names. But for the Jews living in the first century, each name told a story and recalled important places, events, and periods in Israel's history. As we journey through this genealogical summary of Israel's history, we will see how Matthew strategically shows that God's plan for Israel is reaching its climax.

During this first week of Advent, the stage is being set for the greatest drama of all time.

SUNDAY | *The New Elijah*

But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.”

—Luke 1:13–14

What is most interesting about this scene is not simply that Zechariah and Elizabeth finally will be blessed with a child. This child will bring blessings not only to his parents but to all of the people, for John the Baptist will be one of the most important prophets ever sent to Israel. Let us consider three amazing things the angel tells Zechariah about this child.

First, he will not consume wine or strong drink (v. 15). In the Old Testament, “Nazirites” consecrated themselves to God by a vow and separated themselves from normal life. Abstaining from alcohol was a common practice for the Nazirites (see Numbers 6:3; Judges 13:4). So this fact about John the Baptist indicates that he will be set apart for some special service for the Lord, like a Nazirite.

Second, the angel’s description of the child’s being “filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (v. 15) tells us about the kind of service for which John is destined: He will be *a prophet*. It was the Spirit descending on Saul who transformed him into a prophet (see 1 Samuel 10:10), and it was the Spirit of the Lord

who spoke through David so that God's Word would be upon his tongue (see 2 Samuel 23:2). It was this same Spirit who came upon the prophets Ezekiel, Elijah, and Elisha during their ministry in Israel (see Ezekiel 11:5; 2 Kings 2:9–16; see also Joel 2:28). The child “being filled with the Holy Spirit” indicates that John, too, will be a prophet.

Third, the importance of John's prophetic ministry is seen in the final words that the angel uses to describe this child:

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. (Luke  
1:16–17)

These verses echo the last prophetic words of the Old Testament, where Malachi announces that the Lord one day would come to redeem Israel and that he would send his messenger to prepare the people for his arrival (see Malachi 3:1), and this messenger would be like a new Elijah: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet... and he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers (Malachi 4:5–6). In light of this Old Testament background, the angel describes John's ministry as the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy—he will be the new Elijah, preparing the people of Israel for the Lord's coming, which will bring about the reconciliation of families to God and families to each other.

And so, this story is not simply about God's intervening to bless a pious Jewish couple with a child. Rather, *the story is representative of the story of Israel*. Just as Zechariah and Elizabeth are barren and hope for God to show favor by blessing them with a child, so, too, the Jews suffer and long for God to show them favor again by visiting his people. God will respond to Zechariah and Elizabeth's desires for a child in a way that answers the needs of *all* the Jewish people: by sending them a son who will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord and the restoration of Israel.

#### FOR REFLECTION

What are some things I can do each day this Advent to prepare spiritually for Christmas?

*Dear Lord, I pray that I will not take Christ's birth for granted.  
In these four weeks of Advent, prepare my heart for your coming  
this Christmas.*

MONDAY | “*I Am Gabriel*”

And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God; and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news.”

—Luke 1:18–19

Zechariah’s question seems reasonable enough to us. But the angel gives a mystifying response: “I am Gabriel.” Zechariah did not ask for the angel’s name; he asked for assurances!

Imagine meeting someone on an airplane who advises you to buy many lottery tickets because you are going to win the lottery sometime this year. Wondering why you should trust this stranger’s advice, you ask him, “How can I believe this will really happen?” What would you think if the man answered your question simply by giving you his name? “I’m Mr. Smith”: How would *that* answer your question?

Yet the angel Gabriel knew what he was doing. He gave Zechariah the one bit of information that might help him tie all the pieces together. This one detail might help Zechariah see that God was really acting in his very own family’s life in order to bring the story of Israel to its climactic turning point.

Revealing his name was significant because the only time Gabriel is mentioned in the Old Testament is in the important visions given

to the prophet Daniel. In Daniel 9 the prophet was praying for God to show mercy on his people and bring an end to the Jewish sufferings under foreign oppressors. In the middle of Daniel's prayer, the angel Gabriel appeared to him at the hour of the evening sacrifice—the time when the incense would have been offered in the temple.

Gabriel delivered a message of good news and bad news to Daniel. On one hand, the people would continue to suffer under pagan nations for a long time to come. On the other hand, at the end of this period of suffering, God would send an anointed prince (the Messiah) to bring an end to sin and atone for iniquity. This anointed one would usher in everlasting righteousness and bring all of Israel's prophecies to fulfillment (see Daniel 9:24–27).

We can see that Gabriel is no ordinary angel. Revealing his name recalls the prophecies of Daniel 9. The parallels between what happened to Daniel and what just happened to Zechariah highlight this connection even more: Like Daniel, Zechariah *prays on behalf of Israel* as he offers the incense in the temple (see Luke 1:9). Like Daniel, Zechariah makes this prayer *at the hour of the temple sacrifice* (see Luke 1:10). And in the middle of Zechariah's liturgical service, the same angel—*Gabriel*—appears (see Luke 1:11, 19). Luke is clearly inviting his readers to hear the harmony in salvation history and view Zechariah's encounter with the angel in correspondence with Daniel's.

So, Gabriel is revealing a lot more than his name. He is subtly announcing that Daniel 9 is finally coming to fulfillment, and

*Zechariah's own son* is going to play a key part in preparing the people for the long-awaited “anointed one”—the one Gabriel himself originally said would atone for sin, bring everlasting righteousness, and fulfill all prophecy!

FOR REFLECTION

How do I respond when God answers prayer in ways I don't expect?

*Dear God, as Gabriel did with Zechariah, often you answer my questions with answers I don't fully understand. But I trust you and your purposes. During this Advent season, help me see your larger picture for my life.*