

Luke presents his gospel account as the result of much research and likely personal interviews with actual eyewitnesses of Jesus Christ and the things done by Him. Luke's purpose in writing this gospel is to present an accurate account of Jesus Christ, including events that happened before His birth, His crucifixion, His resurrection and His ascension to heaven. He records these events so that we might put our faith in Christ.

4 That thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.

In v. 1-3, Luke addresses a man named Theophilus who has apparently heard of Jesus Christ and perhaps believed in Him for salvation. Luke has researched and gathered all the documentation he could find concerning Christ's life on earth so that Theophilus could understand that everything that he had been taught about Christ was true. The Gospel of Luke is the result of this research. We do not know who Theophilus was, but commentators suggest he may have been an official in the Roman government since Luke addresses him as "most excellent Theophilus," a formal way to address dignitaries which was common in that day.

5 There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. 7 And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were *now* well stricken in years.

"There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea" – Luke sets the time frame of these events as during the reign of Herod the Great, who ruled from 37-4 B.C. Luke records specific details so that anyone could verify that the events described are true.

"a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia [Abijah]" – The priests were divided into 24 "courses" (divisions) and each course served for a week twice a year in the temple. Luke identifies a specific priest who was a member of the course of Abijah.

"and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth" – Zacharias was required to be a descendant of Aaron in order to be qualified as a priest and he was married to Elisabeth, who was also a descendant of Aaron.

"And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" – Unlike some of religious leaders of the day, both Zacharias and his wife were faithful to obey all of God's commandments and ordinances.

"And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were *now* well stricken in years" – They had been unable to have children and now they were both too old to have children naturally. Ordinarily the lack of children was viewed as a lack of God's favor but, as Luke will document, God had a wonderful purpose in withholding children from the couple.

8 And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, 9 According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.

"And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course" – Luke zeroes in on the timing. It was while Zacharias was performing his duties at the temple during one of the weeks that was assigned to his course.

"According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord" – Zacharias had been assigned to burn incense in the holy place in the temple just in front of the veil separating the holy place from the most holy place. This assignment was a high honor that was never assigned to a priest more than once in his lifetime, so Zacharias no doubt regarded this time as the apex of his lifetime of service as a priest.

"And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense" – Incense was offered every morning and every evening. Luke calls our attention to the fact that there were people outside the temple praying and worshiping during one of these times that the incense was being offered, perhaps so that we would be aware of their reaction to these events (v. 21-22).

11 And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And when Zacharias saw *him*, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

The word "troubled" means "to be anxious or distressed." Zacharias was filled with a mix of anxiety and fear, because one moment he was alone within the temple and the next moment an angel was standing there. It was obvious to him that a supernatural event was occurring, a fact that would make anyone uneasy. His uneasiness was amplified by his great reverence for God.

13 But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.

"But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias" – The angel recognizes that Zacharias is afraid and immediately informs him that he has no reason to fear. The angel has not come with words of judgment but with good news that should make Zacharias happy.

"for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son" – Obviously Zacharias had been praying for years that God would give him a son and perhaps he was on the verge of concluding that it would never be God's will. However, the angel proclaims that his appearance is not something to fear because he has come to deliver the good news that God will answer Zacharias' prayer.

"and thou shalt call his name John" – God has ordained that this son's name will be "John," which means "Jehovah has shown grace." This is a fitting name since John's message will be that the Messiah would soon arrive, an expression of God's grace.

14 And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.

The birth of John will bring rejoicing, not only for the obvious reasons for Zacharias and Elisabeth, but his significance will bring joy to many people because he will be the one who announces the coming of the Messiah (the Christ) and His kingdom.

15 For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb.

Abstaining from wine or strong drink was a hallmark of taking a Nazarite vow, which was a temporary dedication of oneself to the LORD for a period of time. One of the reasons for John's greatness in the sight of God was going to be because he would be a Nazarite from birth, dedicated to the LORD all his life, much like Samuel (1 Sam. 1:11). Another reason was because he would be filled with the Holy Ghost even before he was born (v. 41). The hand of God would be on John during his entire life because he had been ordained to fulfill a very special role in God's plan.

16 And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. 17 And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, 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.

As the forerunner of the Messiah, John would fulfill prophecies made by both Malachi and Isaiah. Jesus confirmed that the prophecy of Elijah's coming was fulfilled by John the Baptist (Matt. 17:10-13). **Mal. 4:5-6** "*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.*" John the Baptist also identified himself as the "one crying in the wilderness" that was prophesied by Isaiah (John 1:19-23). **Isa. 40:3-5** "*The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.*"

18 And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.

Abraham had been promised a son under similar circumstances and he laughed at the thought (Gen. 17:17), but it seems that his laughter may have been the result of surprise and amazement rather than unbelief. Zacharias apparently could not believe that he and his wife could have a son at their age and asked the angel for proof to substantiate his incredible claim that it would happen.

19 And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings. 20 And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.

The angel gives his credentials to give credibility to his words by identifying his name as Gabriel and declaring that his assigned post was standing in God's presence (implying that he stood ready to do whatever God commanded him). God Himself had sent Gabriel to bring this good news to Zacharias. However, because he did not believe this message from God, Zacharias would be unable to speak until the child is born. This mild punishment would serve as the proof that what the angel said would come true.

21 And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple. 22 And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless.

Ordinarily it only took a few minutes to offer the incense and then the priest would exit the temple to bless the people. The people mentioned in v. 10 were still waiting for Zacharias to deliver the priestly blessing and were surprised that he had not yet done so. When he finally did emerge from the temple he was unable to speak in order to recite the blessing. His hand motions and inability to speak suggested to them that he had seen a vision while inside the temple.

23 And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.

Zacharias continued to perform his assigned tasks for the remainder of his week without speaking and then he returned home. It's unclear if he continued to burn incense the remainder of the week or if his assignment was for only the one day.

24 And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying, 25 Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.

After Zacharias had come home Elisabeth became pregnant as the angel Gabriel had promised. Commentators have various theories on why Elisabeth "hid herself" for five months but most believe that she secluded herself to contemplate the promise made to Zacharias concerning the child's destiny and/or to thank God for the gift of a son. In those days it was an embarrassment for a woman to be unable to bear children for her husband so she was grateful that God was at last giving her a son. The phrase "he looked on me" implies that Elisabeth was acknowledging that God had heard and answered her prayers for a child.
