

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE – PART TWO

Briefly, Luke sets the scene. Herod the Great was king of Judea under the overall rule of the Emperor. He was a highly efficient but ruthless politician who had been governor of Judea from 47-37BC before becoming king until his death in 4BC. He had succeeded his very successful father and would found a dynasty of Herods who would rule for another 74 years and would frequently feature in the New Testament story. The Herods were Edomites, not Jews, so their rule was resented by most Jewish people. They had to be tough and cruel to keep the job of unwelcome king. Life for ordinary people was not easy. God can still do wonderful things in hard times.(1:5)

This was Zacharias' big moment for which he had waited a lifetime. Because there were so many Levites, offering incense in the temple was a rare privilege which probably came only once, if your name was drawn. Imagine how nervous he was and determined to get it right. This was the special time for prayer in the temple in which he was representing the crowd of people with needs they hoped God would meet. When an angel appeared to him it was to tell him that his own prayer of many years had finally been answered. He and his wife Elizabeth had longed in vain for a child all their married life. They had patiently and faithfully waited. Now it seemed too late, but not for God. They were to have not just a baby but a very special boy who would be the fulfillment of God's promise through Malachi of someone like Elijah who would come to preach powerfully in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.(Mal.4:6) Zacharias was given careful instructions about the boy's name, John, meaning 'the Lord has been gracious', about how they were to bring him up, like a Nazirite,(Num.6) and about his spiritual condition. The fact that he could be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb tells us something about the status of the unborn baby with God. This was the child for whom Israel had waited for 400 years. What an answer to prayer!(1:8-17)

It was all too much for Zacharias who questioned the angel in disbelief. Gabriel identified himself and rebuked Zacharias gently for his lack of faith, as a consequence of which he would stay dumb until the baby was born. Unbelief in God's message means we too have nothing worth saying. When Zacharias emerged after a long delay from the Holy Place he had no ability to preach the message he had presumably long prepared. God had answered but for the moment he could tell no-one except in sign language.(1:18-23)

Elizabeth became pregnant exactly as Gabriel had said, recognizing clearly that this was God's answer to her longing prayer. She hid away for 5 months until her pregnancy was obvious. Meanwhile even more amazing news was being delivered by Gabriel to Elizabeth's cousin, Mary. Far to the north in Nazareth there were an engaged couple who were definitely not yet praying for a son. Traditionally it has been assumed that Mary was a teenager and Joseph a good deal older but there is absolutely no indication of their ages. Both of them were descended from King David. In accordance with the wiser practices of those days, they had had no sexual relationship yet. Mary too was told she would have a son who would be both the next king in David's line and the Son of God,

the promised Messiah. Unlike David, He would be king for ever. Mary questioned how this could happen, without disbelieving as Zacharias had done. God welcomes our believing questions. The answer was very simple. This would be a miraculous creation of the Holy Spirit for whom nothing is impossible. Mary in faith made her body available to God despite the likely humiliation that this could bring as an unmarried girl.(1:24-38)

Demonstrating her acceptance of God's message, which included the news of Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy, Mary rushed straight off to see her cousin. Elizabeth greeted not only Mary but the just conceived baby within her, acknowledging that He was God, and that John, her own unborn baby, had responded with joy to His presence. She encouraged Mary in her faith, who in turn thanked God for the privilege of being chosen to bring God's Son into the world. She would 'magnify' God in her soul by letting God be seen in her life. Through her He would literally be visible. Through our characters and behaviour, He wants to be seen. Mary linked many of the Old Testament promises about the coming Messiah together, (Ps.138:6; Ps.103:17; Ps.98:1; Job.5:11; Ps.107:9; Gen.17-19; Ps.132:11) which anticipated how her soon-to-be-born Son would show God's mercy, power, provision, help and faithfulness to His needy people.(1:39-55)

Just before Elizabeth's baby was due, Mary left to face Joseph and a skeptical community in Nazareth, but God had prepared Joseph.(Matt.1:18) John was born to great excitement in Zacharias and Elizabeth's home. What was he to be called? Zacharias after his father? 'John', he wrote, in obedience to the angel's message. At last he had something to say, and said it beautifully. Passionately he described God's faithfulness in sending the Messiah as promised, to save and redeem, to protect from enemies, to show God's mercy and give His peace. His new son would have the amazing privilege of preparing people to welcome Jesus into their lives. And so do we!(1:56-79)

From the beginning John showed every indication that he was God's man for this purpose and a sense of anticipation began to grow among Jewish people.(1:80)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. How did the orders of a heathen Roman emperor cause the fulfillment of a 700 year old prophecy?(Mic.5:2-5) Why didn't God make more comfortable arrangements for the birth of His Son on earth?
2. What news did the angels give the shepherds? Why did God pick on shepherds rather than more important people? How did the shepherds respond? How would their message have helped Mary and Joseph?
3. Why was the baby named Jesus? What does the offering of doves tell us about the circumstances of Jesus' family?(Lev.12:8) Why were two old people involved in the temple service? How would they too have helped Jesus' parents?
4. In what ways did Jesus mature as a growing boy? How did this show in His relationship with His parents at the age of twelve? Wasn't He being rude to them?