

God Breaks the Silence

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Preacher: Joshua Winters

[0 : 00] All right, well this morning we are embarking on a new series of sermons. We're going to be working our way through the Gospel of Luke. So if you have your Bible with you, open it up to the first chapter of Luke.

This is the third book in the New Testament in your Bible, if you are looking for it there. And Luke is the longest of the Gospel accounts which tell the story of Jesus.

Right out of the gate as we launch on into this new series, we just want to take a few minutes to look at some important background kinds of things. First of all, who was Luke?

According to the Apostle Paul in his letter, Luke was a physician. He was one of the men who traveled with Paul and worked with Paul in spreading the good news about Jesus.

What's unique about Luke's Gospel? We have four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And all of them tell the story of Jesus.

[1 : 06] What's unique about Luke's Gospel? Well, out of the four Gospels, usually it's John that we think of as the one that stands out the most, as being the most different.

He writes with a very different style. He touches on a lot of things that the others don't. The other three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, they have very much similar content in them.

And so they're often referred to as the Synoptic Gospels because of that. And scholars today, they analyze and study each of the Synoptic Gospels.

And they compare them with each other. And they make guesses about which one of them wrote their Gospel first. And, you know, whether one or more of these Gospels use the other as source material.

Because why the similarities between them? Many are confident that there's some kind of a common source, whether it was an apostle or the earlier writings of an apostle that they all drew from, Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

[2 : 06] Others see Mark as being the source, the first one to write his Gospel. And then the others kind of use that as a starting place for writing theirs. We're going to leave all of that analysis to the scholars.

But something useful that they've come up with through their analysis, while much of Luke has similar content to Matthew and Mark, about 42% of Luke's content is only found in Luke.

So we have exclusive details about the birth of Jesus and his infancy. We have accounts of four miracles that were not included in the other Gospels.

There are 15 parables that Jesus told that we only hear about from Luke. There are exclusive details about the resurrection appearances of Jesus that are only in Luke.

And then another really unique thing about Luke's Gospel is that it's the only Gospel with a sequel. Luke continues the story after Jesus' resurrection. And he tells the story of how the church began to grow and the Gospel about Jesus began to spread in the book of Acts, the Acts of the Apostles.

[3 : 18] So Luke has so much to say about Jesus, we would really be missing out on a lot if it weren't for him taking the time to sit down and write this account and its sequel.

Well, what else do we know about Luke? Back to the scholars for a second, there's a whole discussion between them about whether Luke was a Jew or not a Jew, whether he was a Gentile.

And they've got their observations that they bring up. Luke seems to have a very good understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures. And he seems very eager to highlight how Jesus handled himself on the issue of Sabbath and the things Jesus taught about Sabbath.

But there's a passage in Acts where Luke refers to how the Jews named a place, something which in their language means, and then he goes on to talk about it.

And then there's another place in Paul's letter to the Colossian church where Paul lists the Jews who have been working with him by name. And Luke's name is not there, even though he is listed as a co-worker of Paul's in other places.

[4 : 25] So we don't know for sure, but Luke was likely a Gentile. He was likely a non-Jew. And maybe he converted to Judaism before Christ, or perhaps he was just a God-fearing Gentile who was well acquainted with the Jewish faith.

Church history and tradition have it that Luke was from the city of Antioch in Syria, that he was unmarried, childless, and lived a fairly long life.

We might wonder, when did Luke write this gospel that we're about to read? Well, since Luke's gospel account is referred to in the book of Acts, the sequel, and the book of Acts goes right up to about 62 AD.

Paul is in Rome, imprisoned, the first time. And it doesn't tell about Paul's death, which was later on in the 60s. So we know that Acts had to have been written after the events that it describes, and then probably sometime before Paul died.

Which means that Luke had to have completed his gospel sometime before Acts was written, in that time frame. So some suggest that it was in the early 60s that Luke wrote this gospel, and then Acts shortly after.

[5 : 43] Others, maybe an even earlier date. Either way, it wasn't too long after the events of Jesus' life. We're talking within about 30 years of it. And then, for the background stuff, finally, why did Luke write this gospel?

And for the answer to this, let's now look at Luke's introduction to his book, the first four verses. Luke writes, Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who, from the first, were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

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, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

So why did Luke write this account of Jesus? He writes it for a man named Theophilus, so that you, Theophilus, may know the certainty of the things that you have been taught.

So that's Luke's goal. It seems Theophilus, whoever he was, we don't know anymore today, but it seems that he was already a believer in Jesus, but perhaps had some doubts.

[7 : 04] Or perhaps there were some false teachers or opponents that were speaking really loudly in his corner, shaking things up for him. Whatever the case, Luke compiles and writes this account so that Theophilus can have certainty.

What really did happen with Jesus? What did he say? What did he really say and teach? What has really been fulfilled among us?

And there's a desire here on Luke's part for an orderly account. I, too, decided to write an orderly account for you. As you can imagine, with all that's happened in the three years of Jesus' public ministry, and then even all that's happened after that, as the news spreads all over the Mediterranean world, there could be a lot of, well, I heard that he said this, or I heard that he did this, and, well, so-and-so said that it went this way.

It could be easy to get all jumbled up. Wouldn't it be good to have an orderly, accurate account of just what did happen with Jesus? That's Luke's goal here.

And we also get a little more info about Luke here as well, because we might be wondering, you know, where did Luke get all this from that he writes? We notice here that Luke himself was not a firsthand eyewitness of Jesus.

[8 : 32] He says, So Luke does not claim to be a firsthand eyewitness.

He separates himself from those who were. What they saw and heard, they passed along to us, is what he says. Not only that, but many have already undertaken to do this thing that Luke is doing here, to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us.

So this kind of adds credibility for Theophilus. Like, this isn't just a bunch of stories cooked up by a few little guys. Like, no, these things that happened were public.

Many have already tried to gather up the testimonies from various people and put together an account like I'm doing here now, because there's just so much, so much that happened.

So many people's lives were impacted. So many people witnessed it. And so know that this is not a new or strange thing. But then we see that Luke has not been one to just accept all this about Jesus without checking into it deeply.

[9 : 56] He says, I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning. And so Luke himself, he wasn't content to just hear all this stuff about Jesus secondhand.

And rightly so. Because the news coming out of Galilee and Jerusalem about Jesus was astonishing. Miracles being done.

Luke is saying, I went back to the sources to verify these things myself. And, you know, scholars, as they read about this, they assume that Luke just collected up the writings of others.

And maybe it's because scholars are more focused on writing and writings. But when I look at some of the content here in Luke's gospel, like the details surrounding Jesus' birth, I mean, this is something that the majority in Israel knew little about at first.

I would suggest that quite likely Luke went straight to the sources and actually met with and talked to Elizabeth and Zachariah.

[11 : 07] met with and talked to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Met with various people who had been healed and heard from them the actual testimony of how Jesus did it.

Met with those two guys that were on the road to Emmaus and encountered Jesus alive and then wrote these things down. along with the stuff that the apostles themselves had already written and recorded.

I mean, how else could we have the very words and details of some of these private prayers and conversations and angelic visits and personal encounters?

I think Luke's telling us right here, no, I went back to the sources and carefully investigated everything from the beginning. And now I want to lay it all out for you, Theophilus, so that you can know with certainty just what did happen with Jesus.

What did he say? What did he do? Let's keep going. It all started, according to Luke, in the time of King Herod in Judea with a priest named Zachariah.

[12 : 19] In the time of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest named Zachariah who belonged to the priestly division. His wife, Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.

Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive and they were both very old.

So it all started with a priest named Zachariah, says Luke. And Luke states Zachariah's priestly lineage. Both he and his wife were of the priestly line, descended from Aaron, the brother of Moses. And both of them, he says, were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. Now this doesn't mean that they were sinless, living perfectly before God, in perfect obedience.

But it means that the normal everyday lives of these two were lived doing what was right in the sight of God. These are people who sought to honor God in everything.

[13 : 31] They were people of excellent reputation. And everybody around them knew it. Blame or accusation from others just wouldn't have stuck to them because everybody knew that they feared the Lord, that they loved the Lord.

They really stood out among people as those who actually obey God's commands, persistently and consistently. Much like the righteous faithful of the Old Testament, men like King David.

But, says Luke, Zachariah and his wife were childless because Elizabeth had not been able to conceive and they were both very old.

So the reason they had no children was because Elizabeth had been barren. And it wasn't a punishment from God. Many in those days equated children with the blessing and favor of God and the lack of children with being punished or cursed by God.

But Luke's already told us they were both righteous people. They had God's favor. And as you can imagine, they tried and tried and tried to conceive over the years, but nothing.

[14 : 50] Now here they are, elderly, no children. They were both very old. For those of you who are younger and may not know this, there comes a time in a woman's life when it is no longer physically or biologically possible to have a baby.

It's exceedingly rare for a woman to conceive and have a child after the age of 50 without some form of fertility treatment or all kinds of stuff that we do today with modern medicine and technology.

But they didn't have any of that back then. And judging by the language here, Zachariah and Elizabeth were not just old, but very old.

And so they had come to that point in life where it was now physically and biologically impossible for Elizabeth to have children. Once when Zachariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot according to the custom of the priesthood to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

So Luke sets the scene for us. Zachariah has been chosen from among the priestly families to come to Jerusalem and to do his priestly duties at the temple of the Lord. There was a temple to Yahweh, the Lord, the God of Israel in the city of Jerusalem.

[16:24] And at the temple, they had outer courts and they had inner courts. They had an altar for sacrificing animals. And then they had like a room that was called the Holy Place.

And only the priest could enter into that room. And they would burn incense and other things. They would burn a fragrant, sweet-smelling incense to God in there.

So this is what Zachariah was doing. The worshipers, he says, are assembled outside and they're praying. And Zachariah is alone in the Holy Place burning this incense.

Verse 11. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zachariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zachariah. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son and you are to call him John.

[17:37] He will be a joy and delight to you and many will rejoice because of his birth. 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.

He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 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.

Wow. Amazing. Can you imagine what that would have been like for Zachariah on that day? He's going in.

He's alone. There's nobody else in the room and then all of a sudden bam! Right in front of him. An angel. And the angel begins to speak to him.

Luke emphasizes the fear in Zachariah's heart in that moment. Quite literally he was troubled. He was unsettled. Frightened. Fear fell upon him. And what does the angel say to Zachariah?

[19:04] Well quite a lot. First of all the angel tells him that his prayers have been heard and that his wife Elizabeth will bear him a son who he is to call John.

With both Zachariah and Elizabeth being righteous people you can imagine just how often they might have prayed to God for a child. Again and again and again.

How many times had they called out to God to give them a child over the years? And maybe by now they'd stopped asking given their ages. But the angel tells them that the prayer that they had been praying over all those years was heard by God and the time has now come for his answer.

you and Elizabeth are going to have a son. And we notice the language here it's very clear this is not going to come through some kind of surrogate mother or adoption or something else.

Elizabeth will bear you a son. And this son says the angel will be a joy and delight to you and many will rejoice in his birth.

[20:22] I mean we can imagine how this baby would bring joy to Zachariah and Elizabeth because that's what children do, right? Most of the time. But this is greater than that.

It says he will be a joy and delight to you and many will rejoice because of his birth for because he will be great in the sight of the Lord.

So this child will be special. A man who will be great among men not by our usual way of measuring it but by God's way of measuring it in the sight of the Lord.

And the angel gives some instruction. He's never to take wine or fermented drink. God prescribes one way in which he is to be set apart in the way that he lives.

He's to live differently from others by abstaining from alcohol. But more significantly than that God says that this child who is to be called John will be filled with the Holy Spirit of God even before he is born.

[21:34] Think about that. God's saying I'm going to put my own spirit upon this child while he's still in the womb. These words were written almost 2,000 years ago but don't they emphasize the

humanity and personhood of a pre-born child?

A person still developing and growing in the earliest stages of human life, yes yet God's spirit can fill him there. And what is this child destined to do?

Verse 16 He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. This son of yours Zachariah is going to be instrumental in turning the hearts of the people of Israel back to Yahweh back to the Lord their God.

Verse 17 This child is going to serve the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah. Elijah was a prophet from many centuries earlier.

probably the greatest and most well-known of the prophets other than Moses. There's going to be a similarity to Elijah and his prophetic ministry and what God did through him and your son Zachariah.

[22 : 58] But as we'll find out it's not mainly that John's going to do great miracles like Elijah did. It has more to do with the spirit and the tone and the message. of John's ministry in the same way that Elijah called the people of Israel back to God in the days where things were going off the rail and there was a wicked king in power so too John will be a prophet of the Lord who calls the nation back to God.

He's going to turn the hearts of parents to their children says the angel. We glance backwards the very last thing spoken by the Old Testament prophet Malachi 400 years before this.

There's been no prophet since, no word of the Lord since. The very last words of Malachi in Malachi chapter 4 God says see I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.

He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children. That's the same thing that the angel says John is going to do.

He's going to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous. When people turn back to God it changes everything.

[24 : 27] It changes your heart. Self-centeredness and selfishness are replaced with love which spills out into all your relationships starting with your family starting with your children and then from there on.

Zachariah your son is going to turn the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous. In other words people who are flat out living in disobedience to God today Zachariah your son is going to have a role in them understanding and seeing the wisdom of the righteous and turning their hearts to God.

Zachariah your son is going to prepare a people for the Lord. Wow. What might Zachariah be feeling in this moment? Can you imagine what thoughts might be going through his mind?

It's an incredible moment. An angel of God appears to an elderly man with almost unbelievable good news not just of answer to his old prayer but of widespread spiritual reform and renewal for the nation.

How does Zachariah respond? Zachariah asked the angel how can I be sure of this? I'm an old man and my wife is well along in years.

[25 : 55] 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 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.

How does Zachariah respond to all this? With wonder pride excitement joy well no the angel tells us because you did not believe my words you did not believe my words says the angel that was

Zachariah's response he did not believe the angel's words he was skeptical he was full of doubt in this moment when he says how can I be sure of this I'm an old man and my wife is well along in years there's this kind of profound and deep seated unbelief in his heart like you're telling me that me and my wife are going to be parents in our old age look at us that's ridiculous that's impossible that's absurd and the angel responds by saying make no mistake I am Gabriel what do

I do as an angel I stand in the very presence of God almighty and he has sent me to you to tell you this good news and it will happen exactly as I have said even though you have not believed it and there's this sort of disciplinary consequence that's put on Zachariah because you did not believe my words you will be silent and unable to speak until the day this happens meanwhile the people were waiting for Zachariah that is those worshipping outside and praying outside the temple they were wondering why he stayed so long in the temple 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 so can you imagine this like he's coming out and what on earth has happened to Zachariah he looks like he's playing charades he's acting something out they probably speculated and guessed and eventually at just this moment what did you have a vision from God yeah when his time of service was completed Zachariah returned home after this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion 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 not having children in those days it was considered a disgrace being a woman who can't bear a child was like being a man with no legs back then unable to work unable to provide for the family and people were cruel they probably speculated and gossiped about the reason that she couldn't have kids but no more and Elizabeth gives all the credit for her pregnancy to

God she knows that this is his doing a miraculous conception and this according to Luke is where the story of Jesus began this was the first sign in a series of many an awesome angelic encounter and a miraculous conception for an elderly God-fearing couple which came as a total surprise to them and to all the new around them God finally broke that 400 year silence with the word of his angel there is coming another prophet a great one he's going to prepare the hearts of the people people are going to turn back to the Lord many of them as a result and he will be your son Zachariah but what should our response to all this be today I think

[30 : 52] Zachariah shows us what our response to all this should be or rather what our response should not be that's my son do you believe the words that Gabriel spoke to Zachariah over 2,000 years ago or are you like Zachariah a doubt filled skeptic who looks at this story and says that's impossible there's a sort of irony here isn't there God acts in a supernatural spectacular way to announce good news a message of great hope all the longings that you've had they're about to be fulfilled and the man he chooses to announce it to responds in actual disbelief he doesn't believe the words of

God he was a righteous God-fearing man yes but the first thing we see out of him when God speaks to him is a flat-out disbelief of God's words I think this is one of those unique evidences that this is really a true account I mean this would be embarrassing for Zachariah humiliating and everybody else knows about it because well he couldn't talk for nine months why would God take away your ability to speak Zachariah well because when I first heard the news I didn't believe it that was Zachariah's response to God's good news back then what's your response to God's good news and the rest of it today do you believe God do you believe that

John was miraculously conceived by the power of God and that he came full of God's Holy Spirit to prepare us for the coming of the Lord himself the Lord Jesus our Savior the Messiah and if you don't believe this why not let Zachariah be a lesson to us all don't think that for a moment if God were to send an angel to you to appear to you and speak to you that then you would believe an angelic encounter wasn't enough for Zachariah to believe God said he was going to do something that seemed utterly impossible to Zachariah and it was there that his faith wavered real faith in God is not so much about having that special experience than about simply trusting and believing in your heart that

God can do what he says and I love how this story continues believe it or not Zachariah you're going to see me do what I have said I will do I'll bring about this joy and delight for you and this rejoicing for many and for the next nine months you won't be able to share in this joy in the same way because you did not believe you won't be able to speak but once it takes place I'll give you your speech again and you will glorify my name you will have you will declare my goodness and so I think there's a little message in here for us don't be like Zachariah God can really do the impossible he really did do the impossible in this situation in this story the whole account of Luke is the story of impossible after impossible happening because God does it because of his goodness to us so I want to encourage you surrender your heart to that simple faith the Lord can do what he says he will do as both Zachariah and his wife discovered God is not a God who takes pleasure in withholding good he is not a God who ignores our prayers he hears all of them and he's full of grace and favor just waiting to be unleashed despite our failings towards him this is sign number one in the gospel of Luke where God finally breaks the silence do you believe his words let's pray father in heaven we believe that's why we're here this morning because we believe what an awesome thing you did we love this story pray that you would fill us with joy too just like they had just remembering again that you came just as you said you started things up when it seemed like everything had died

down and I pray that we would just be filled with that joy and that it would overflow and in our eagerness to share this good news with people around us especially as we head towards [37 : 06] Christmas Lord that time when we remember your birth may this news be on our lips the signs that you gave the angel you sent and we know that not everybody will respond with faith and belief but we do and we pray that some will for your name amen