

AM Luke 1:1-25 A People Prepared

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[0 : 00] Let's turn now to the Bible, and our reading, as you may by now have guessed, is from Luke chapter 1.

It's quite some while since I last preached here on a Sunday, but suddenly I find myself preaching three weeks running. This morning, and then twice next Sunday, and then again at the carol service.

And at the carol service, I'm planning to speak on a text from Luke chapter 2. So it seemed good to me to look during these three previous sermons at Luke chapter 1.

And today we'll look at just verses 1 to 25. 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.

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah.

[1 : 52] 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.

[3 : 26] 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? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years. 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.

[4 : 53] 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.

Let me ask you to turn now to Luke chapter 1.

And to the words of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah, concerning John the Baptist, in verses 16 and 17.

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.

[6 : 28] When I was a boy, I went for a short while to the scouts. It was only a very short while.

I don't know what the scouts do these days, but in those days they used to play rough games that I hated. And they used to teach practical skills like tying knots, which I just didn't understand.

I'd quite enjoyed going to Cubs, the junior version of scouts, with our Kayla reading stories from the Jungle Book. But after one week in the scouts, I decided that was not for me.

But I do remember the scout motto, be prepared. Well, our text today is about being prepared in a much higher sense.

The scout motto was about being practically ready for all the unexpected challenges of life. Our text is about being spiritually ready.

[7 : 52] The angel here is speaking about the ministry of John the Baptist preparing Israel for the greatest event in history up to that point, the coming of the Messiah.

God had planned this event before the world was made. And he'd been preparing for it for centuries. He'd sent his prophets to speak of it in ever-increasing detail.

Now the time had come. But first it was necessary to prepare the people. And that was the task of John the Baptist.

The last of the prophets before Christ, the herald and the forerunner of Christ. I want us today to look at this preparatory ministry of John the Baptist.

In some respects it's a unique ministry. Christ has now come so John's work is complete. And yet it is also I believe a pattern for our gospel ministry today.

[9 : 23] John's ministry and ours are essentially the same. Both aim at preparing a people for the Lord.

The difference is one of perspective. John preached before the cross we preach in the light of the cross. But the message is the same.

Salvation through Christ who died on the cross. John was preparing for the first coming of Christ. We are preparing for the second coming. But the ultimate aim is the same. To prepare men and women and children for eternity.

We'll look today first at John's ministry and then at ours. First though let's just look at the story.

Luke's introduction and the appearance of the angel to Zechariah.

[10 : 31] Luke begins with a formal dedication of his gospel to Theophilus. in verses 1 to 4. The name Theophilus means lover of God.

And it could simply mean anyone who is sincerely seeking God. Though most commentators take it to be some Roman official.

Possibly one of the officials involved in Paul's trial. Luke being a companion of Paul. Paul. He explains his aim.

It is to give an orderly account of these great events on which the Christian faith is based. Luke himself had followed these events closely he says.

He talked with eyewitnesses so that he could guarantee that this was a true and correct record. reliable and accurate historical account.

[11 : 43] Now this is important because some of the stories that he is going to tell might seem to stretch the limits of credibility. And this story about Zacharias might seem to be far-fetched.

But no, Luke says, this really did happen. Story begins in verse 5 with a priest called Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth in the days of Herod the king.

Both were descendants of Aaron and both were righteous before God living blameless lives, obeying the commandments as far as any human being can.

But there was one big sadness in their lives. They had no child and there was no prospect of one because they were both old. And as Elizabeth indicates in verse 25, in those days childlessness was regarded as a reproach.

but all that was about to change. A miracle baby is about to be born. At crucial moments in Bible history there is often a remarkable birth.

[13:16] Think of Sarah and the birth of Isaac or Hannah and the birth of Samuel or later of course Mary and the birth of Jesus.

God has plans here for another extraordinary child. The day came when it was Zechariah's turn to minister in the temple.

That would have been a big event for him. Possibly a once in a lifetime event. There were many descendants of Aaron by this time.

Many priests and they weren't all needed every day so they took it in turns and they cast lots to decide who did what.

Zechariah's turn and he was given the most important task of all offering incense while the people prayed outside.

[14:20] The incense rising up being a symbol of prayer. And it's just then as he's offering the incense that an angel appears.

Zechariah is afraid as people always are in the Bible when they see an angel. But the angel says don't be afraid Zechariah your prayer is heard.

Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you shall call his name John in Hebrew Johanan which means God is gracious. Maybe the angel is referring there to his private prayers for a child.

Perhaps more likely he's referring to his public prayer as a priest praying for the salvation of Israel. God will be gracious to Israel.

this will indeed be an extraordinary child. You will have joy and gladness the angel says. Many will rejoice at his birth for he will be great before the Lord.

[15:37] Note those words before the Lord. He won't just be great. King Herod was called Herod the Great. Yes in the eyes of the world he was great because he was ruler of a kingdom and he was vastly wealthy and he had the power of life and death over people.

That's what the world counts as greatness. Now he will be great in the sight of the Lord. The Lord judges greatness quite differently from the world.

I was down in Hazelmere in Surrey last week and I went into the church where I used to worship and it was something of a shock in a way to find a memorial plaque on the wall inside the church to someone I knew that made me feel very very old.

This good man Sir John Partridge he had a very simple epitaph great in faith and wisdom that's greatness before the Lord.

We were down there for a funeral and the preacher chose as his text from Psalm 18 your gentleness has made me great and he spoke of the man whose funeral it was Pastor Charles Sleeman as being a gentle man and that God given gentleness was his greatness.

[17:18] Well John the Baptist had spiritual greatness. He will not drink wine he says meaning that he will be dedicated to God that being the Nazarite vow but he will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb if ever you wanted proof that the unborn child is a real human being and not just an embryo to be disposed of as some people seem to think well there it is John the Baptist had the Holy Spirit in him while he was still in the womb knowing the scriptures Zechariah might well have been reminded here of Samson in the Old Testament we are reminded perhaps of Paul's words in Ephesians 5 do not get drunk with wine but be filled with the

Spirit an extraordinary man with an extraordinary ministry he was the herald of Christ Christ verses 16 and 17 speak of that but we'll come back to that in just a moment for now just notice the sequel Zechariah struggled to believe says in verse 18 how shall I know this for I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years the Bible says of Abraham that he staggered not in unbelief Zechariah did stagger and he is sternly rebuked for it he struck down until the child is born he has to make signs to the crowd to tell them that he has had a vision now we may well sympathize with him after all this was an extraordinary promise that had been made to him but it was an angel who had given it to him and not just any angel but

Gabriel who stood in the presence of God he ought to have believed no doubt after the angels rebuke he did believe Elizabeth certainly believed and she rejoiced and Zechariah would rejoice later but now let's go back to verses 16 and 17 and consider John's ministry five things are mentioned here first he will turn many of the Israelites to the Lord their God second he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah third he will turn the fathers to the children fourth he will turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the just and finally the end result of all that he will make ready for the Lord a people prepared all of these promises are saturated in

Old Testament allusions and all of them connect John with Elijah turning Israel to the Lord their God isn't that precisely what Elijah did at a time when Israel had turned to idolatry Elijah set up a contest between him and the priests of Baal as to whose God would send fire upon the sacrifice he won the contest of course and the people cried out the Lord he is God going before him in the spirit and power of Elijah reminds us of a prophecy in Malachi Malachi 3 verse 1 there's a prophecy of John the Baptist himself behold I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me Malachi 4 verse 5 behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord now it's true that the Jews sometimes understand that literally that Elijah himself will return but Jesus made it clear that that prophecy referred to John the Baptist Matthew 17 10 to 13 if you want to read it and John himself says in John 1 23 I am the one the voice of one crying out in the wilderness make straight the ways of the Lord quoting a similar prophecy in Isaiah 40 now when it says he will go before him we understand that that means Christ Christ and

[22 : 45] Christ is not mentioned up to this point the antecedent as the scholars would say the preceding noun to which this refers is actually the Lord their God you see the implication that Christ is the Lord their God as indeed it says in Isaiah and Malachi turning the fathers to the children is also a reference to Malachi the last promise in the Old Testament is he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers we can take that literally as reconciliation between generations don't we need that today but possibly it's meant spiritually

Israel returning to the ways of their fathers Malachi 4 verse 4 says remember the law of my servant Moses in other words seek the old paths where the good way is and that would fit in also with the idea of the disobedient turning to the wisdom of the just all of this would result in a people prepared for the Lord ready to receive the Messiah the point is not that they would be worthy to receive him just ready to receive him they would know who he was because John would point him out and they would know that they needed him because John would show them their sins and their need of salvation if you turn over to

Luke chapter 3 you will see how John fulfilled that ministry that was given to him describes there how he preached in the wilderness and baptized people in the river Jordan Matthew's gospel tells us that he wore camels hair and a leather belt no doubt to remind them of Elijah and that he ate wild locusts and honey but the heart of his ministry is in two things he preached repentance and he preached Christ first he preached repentance in Luke 3 and verse 3 he told the people that they must turn from their sins he proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin repentance means turning and he was very practical about it told them to share with the poor told tax collectors to be honest told the soldiers not to extort money and to be content with their wages and he baptized them in the

Jordan as a sign of being cleansed from their sins that's why he's called John the Baptist but also secondly he preached Christ in Luke 3 16 when some began to wonder if he was the Messiah he said no I baptize you with water but one who is mightier than I is coming he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire and when Jesus actually appeared we're told in John 1 29 that John the Baptist cried out behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world here was John the son of a priest pointing to the true priest who would offer up himself as a sacrifice for sin on the cross that is how their sins and our sins can be forgiven

John was therefore the herald of Christ even today the arrival of a king is often announced with some kind of pageantry maybe the trumpeters will play a fan fair maybe someone will announce his majesty the king and everyone will stand up and sing the national anthem well here was John announcing his majesty king Jesus Jesus the lamb of God Jesus the saviour of the world this was John's ministry what about ours our ministry today I would suggest is essentially the same calling people to repentance and pointing them to Christ some of the outward aspects of John's ministry were of course unique ministers today don't have to dress up in camel's hair or eat wild locusts thankfully nor did we have to take the vows of the

[28 : 38] Nazarite or go out into the wilderness to preach but we still preach repentance and we still preach Christ that's how Jesus described the gospel ministry Luke 24 45 thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and the third day rise from the dead and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem that's what Peter did on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 he cried out repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit repent and believe in Jesus those are the two main points of our ministry our message is still behold the lamb

and our desire is still to prepare a people for the

Lord God wants a people for himself Paul says Titus 2 14 Christ gave himself for us to redeem us to redeem us from all unrighteousness from all lawlessness unrighteousness purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works one day Christ is coming again and we want especially to prepare people for that he's coming to judge the world and we want to prepare people for judgment we want people to trust in Christ as their saviour so that on that great day they may be welcomed by Christ and not cast away he's coming to as the bridegroom the church being his bride John the Baptist himself spoke of that John 3 29 we want Christians to be ready for that day again it's not a question of being worthy we can never be worthy it's a question of being ready bride goes to great lengths to look her best on the wedding day not because she is afraid that the bridegroom might suddenly change his mind and refuse to marry her if she doesn't look her best but simply because she loves him and wants to please him likewise we Christians want to be the best we can be for our heavenly bridegroom but beyond that we want people to be prepared for eternity we want them to be prepared not just for that one day of judgment but for all the ages to come the only way to be prepared is to trust in

Christ as your saviour and your lord the question is what will you do with that message the angel was very precise in what he said to Zechariah he will turn many of the children of Israel to the lord their god many but sadly not all he would make ready a people prepared for the lord but not everyone would be found amongst those people Zechariah himself found it hard to believe what the angel said and many people today find it hard to believe the gospel and yet it's true Christ really has come and died for our sins and risen again and he really will save all who trust in him he really will forgive them he really will change their lives he really will accept you amongst his people and he really will come again the

Old Testament prophet Amos once said prepare to meet your God he said that in the context of judgment John the Baptist could have said it literally to the people of his day the son of God was in their midst prepare to meet him we can say it spiritually prepare to meet him by faith here in this life prepare to meet him in person in the life to come may all of us here be a people prepared amen