

Luke 1:1-25 Joy for Sorrow

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Preacher: Rev Trevor Kane

[0 : 00] Luke's Gospel, Luke's Gospel chapter 1. We're going to consider these first 25 verses together this morning in Luke chapter 1. Maybe you're wondering why we're looking at Luke's Gospel together rather than Matthew, Mark or John.

Part of it is that we've already studied the book of Acts. Over the not too distant past. And of course Luke is the sort of counterpart to Acts. Luke is the first part of the two work volume that is Luke and Acts.

So in a sense it made sense for us. We're familiar with Luke's style. We're familiar with the way that Luke writes. So it made sense for us to consider Luke's Gospel rather than any of the others. Luke chapter 1. Beginning to read it, verse 1. And this is the Word of God. 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 that you have been taught.

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

[1 : 38] 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 law 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. 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.

[2 : 56] And Zechariah said to the angel, How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife has 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. And they realized that he'd 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.

[3 : 59] Amen. This is the reading of God's inspired, inerrant word. In our Bibles, please, to 1 Samuel. 1 Samuel chapter 1.

There we read of another woman who was considered barren, another woman whose womb had been closed by the Lord, but ultimately another woman who was blessed with children. This is, of course, the story of Elkanah and Hannah.

It's a common theme in Scripture of the Lord doing the unexpected for those who call to him. 1 Samuel chapter 1.

Beginning to read at verse 1, this is the word of God. There was a certain man of Ramathim Zophim, of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah, the son of Jerome, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zoph, in Ephrathite.

He had two wives. The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other, Peninah. And Peninah had children, but Hannah had no children. Now, this man used to go up year by year from the city to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord.

[5 : 19] On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninah, his wife, and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb.

And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year by year. As often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her.

Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?

After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly.

And she vowed a vow and said, O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life.

[6 : 24] And no razor shall touch his head. As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was speaking in her heart.

Only her lips moved and her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman. And Eli said to her, How long will you go on being drunk?

Put your wine away from you. But Hannah answered, No, my Lord. I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman. For all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation. Then Eli answered, Go in peace. And the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him.

And she said, Let your servant find favour in your eyes. Then the woman went her way and ate. And her face was no longer sad. They rose early in the morning and worshipped before the Lord.

[7 : 24] Then they went back to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her. And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. And she called his name Samuel.

For she said, I have asked for him from the Lord. The man Elkanah and all his house went up to offer to the Lord the yearly sacrifice, and to pay his vow.

But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the Lord, and dwell there forever. Elkanah, her husband, said to her, Do what seems best to you.

Wait until you have weaned him. Only may the Lord establish his word. So the woman remained, and nursed her son, until she weaned him. And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah for flour, a skin of wine, and she brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh.

And the child was young. Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, O my Lord, as you live, my Lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord.

[8 : 30] For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord.

And he worshipped the Lord there. Amen. This is a reading of God's inspired, inerrant word. Let us turn. Let's turn then, please, and have our Bibles open at Luke chapter 1.

Luke chapter 1. We're going to think about these first 25 verses this morning. These first 25 verses of Luke chapter 1. And it will be helpful to us, if we have them open in front of us, as we come to it this morning.

Luke chapter 1, and verses 1 through 25. As most of you know, I've been the chaplain at Dalbedee Star Football Club now, for just kind of over a year.

Part of my role is going to matches, and going to training. And one of the most satisfying aspects as a chaplain, even as a chaplain, is seeing something that the guys work hard on in training, come to fruition in a match.

[9 : 35] Something that the guys work hard on training, showing fruit in the match. One Monday night we were there, the guys did heading drills for about an hour.

And I'm sure halfway through these heading drills, some of them were thinking, what on earth is the point of this? Why are we doing this? But then lo and behold, Saturday comes, and they score a goal from a header.

What they worked on in training, paid off in the match. What's the purpose? What's the point? It's to get them ready. It's to get them prepared, for training, for the match.

And as we come to Luke's gospel this morning, these first 25 verses really seek to answer the question, what's the point? Why is Luke writing his gospel?

Why is he telling us this life story of Jesus? He tells us what the purpose is. He tells us what the point of his gospel is.

[10 : 34] He tells us what the point of John the Baptist coming is. He tells us what the point of the forerunner coming is. He tells us what the purpose and point of this old, childless couple is.

He explains to us what the purpose is in their pain. We want to see four things this morning. Think about four things this morning. Firstly, we want to think about the purpose of the book.

As we see this introduction that Luke writes for us, he tells us the purpose. Why it is he's decided to sit down and write this gospel. Secondly then, we see the pain of barrenness.

We're introduced to this couple, this old couple who are righteous, who follow the laws of God, but ultimately are barren. Thirdly then, we see the purpose of the boy, what it is that John the Baptist is coming to do, what it is that John the Baptist's ministry is.

And then fourthly, finally and wonderfully, we see the removal of barrenness, that Elizabeth conceives and gives birth to a son.

[11 : 44] So firstly then, we want to think about the purpose of the book. Why it is that Luke has written this account of Jesus' life. And we see that in verses 1 through 4. Verses 1 through 4.

We begin to see the purpose of the book in verse 1, don't we? Luke says and tells us that many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished.

Many have tried. Many have sat down and written accounts of Jesus' life. Many have sat down and told us what Jesus did. Almost certainly by this time, Mark's gospel would have been in circulation.

This is one of the accounts that Luke is talking about and undoubtedly draws from. But there are many who have undertaken that. There are many who have sat down to write an account of Jesus' life, most of which are now lost to us.

Most of which we don't have access to anymore. But Luke did. But where is his source? Where is he getting his information from? Well, he tells us that in verse 2 as well, doesn't he?

[12 : 49] Just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us. So where is Luke's information coming from? What's his source?

Every good journalist needs a source. Every good historian needs to know where the sources are.

So where is Luke's source according to verse 2? Well, it's the eyewitnesses and it's the ministers of the word.

We know from our studies in Acts that Luke has spent a lot of time with the Apostle Paul, don't we? He's travelled round with them. He's taken some of the missionary journeys with him. And no doubt Paul is one of the eyewitnesses who's informed.

Look, no doubt Paul has been able to introduce him to others and say, well, have you talked to such and such? Have you talked to such and such? They saw things that I didn't see.

But the idea that's conveyed to us is that these were people who knew. These were people who had seen. These were people who had experienced the ministry of Christ.

[13:51] And it's them that Luke says that he's interviewed. It's them that Luke says has passed this information on to him. Those who saw with their eyes. Those who heard with their ears.

Those who travelled the roads. It's them who Luke has talked to. I follow the Dumfries and Galloway police on Facebook and Twitter.

And one of the things that they always ask about is crimes that have been reported. They always say, you know, did you see anything on such and such a date, at such and such a time, at such and such a place? They're looking for witnesses.

They're looking for people who have seen and heard things. They're looking for people who have experienced what's happened. You know, rarely does it say the police are looking for anyone who's heard something down the pub.

If anyone has any hearsay or conjecture, please report it to us. No, they want people who were there. They want people who saw and heard.

[14:51] And that's what Luke says here. These are the people I consulted. These are the people who reported to me. Those who saw and heard. And having done all this research, Luke says, having conducted all these interviews, having talked to all the people, having looked at all the evidence, it seemed good to me to write, verse 3, an orderly account.

This doesn't necessarily mean orderly as in how we might think of orderly. We might think of orderly as kind of chronologically orderly. You know, that this happened, and this happened, and this happened.

That's not necessarily the way that Luke uses orderly here. Rather, what Luke means is that there's a structure to his account. There's a structure to the narrative that he brings us. It isn't just a random collection of saying and events.

It isn't that Luke was writing, and then something popped into his head, and he thought, I better write that down. And then something else popped in, and he thought, I better write that down. This gospel, this life story of Jesus, has a plan, and a purpose.

And then we come to the real purpose, in verse 4, if you like. The real reason for writing, if you like. That Theophilus may have certainty concerning the things that he'd been taught.

[16:12] All of this research, all of this writing, all of these interviews, all of this collecting of information together, all of this ordering of the information that he has, has been done, so that Theophilus might have certainty.

So that Theophilus might know, for a fact, the things that he's been taught. So that Theophilus' faith might be strengthened.

And it's important, and it's important as we come to the Bible, that we remember this, friends. The Bible can stand up to scrutiny.

The Bible can stand up to any unbiased examination of the facts. Luke has conducted his research. Luke has done his job properly. He has taken care under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, of course, to make sure that the things are written that are accurate and true.

As we come to the Gospel, as we come to start this series, and it's good to be reminded of that. It's good to be reminded that this Gospel is written so that we might have confidence.

[17:25] It's good to be reminded that this Gospel is written so that our faith in Christ might be increased. It's good to be reminded that this Bible that we hold in our hands bears scrutiny.

But maybe you're here this morning and you're not yet a Christian. We'll then approach this series with an open mind. And it might just surprise you who Christ is and what he came to do.

It might just surprise you who Jesus really is. So that's the purpose of the book then. And it's written to increase Theophilus' certainty about the things he's been taught.

Secondly then, we want to see the pain of barrenness. The pain of barrenness. And we see that in verses 5 through 7. 5 through 7. So he's outlined the purpose of the book.

He's written this introduction, this kind of foreword, if you like, to the book. It's written so that Theophilus might have confidence. But then we're introduced to this family, this married couple.

[18:30] And Luke introduces us to some of the key figures in the book. We're introduced, first of all, verse 5, to Herod, the king of Judea. This Herod was, by all accounts, a tyrant. He'd had members of his own family put to death to ensure they couldn't rebel against him.

He, of course, had all the baby boys put to death when he heard that the king of the Jews had been born. So these are dark days politically. These are hard times politically.

We remember, of course, we've just finished the book of Judges, haven't we? We remember how we saw last week that part of the purpose of the book of Judges was to set the scene for the king. Was to remind us that in those days there was no king in Israel and every man did what was right in his own eyes.

It set the backdrop for the monarchy. But even here we see how far that has fallen, if you like. Even here we see that the king wasn't the answer.

That these kings, albeit Gentile kings, were not the answer. This darkness persisted. Herod presided over a period of darkness, but we're introduced to some light, finally.

[19 : 42] In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah of the division of Abijah and his wife Elizabeth, also from a priestly family. This is a family that would be doubly blessed.

This was kind of a great society wedding, if you like. These two families coming together, these two people coming together from priestly lines. The sort of closest modern equivalent that I could come up with was when two celebrities get married.

When, you know, David and Victoria Beckham, for example, got married. It was two celebrities combining their wealth and power and prestige. And that's how it would have been here.

That we had one priestly family marrying another priestly family. This would have been a family that was blessed. And the anticipation keeps building in verse 6, doesn't it?

Because what does Luke tell us about these two people? They were both righteous before God.

They were walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. They were the holy people of the time.

[20 : 47] They were the people who were serious about religion. They were the people who were serious about keeping God's law. About following everything that God said. Amen.

Now don't misunderstand what Luke's saying here. He's not saying that Elizabeth and Zechariah were sinless, that they were perfect with his use of the word righteous.

Rather, they were those who followed the commands of God. They were those who did their best to live godly, holy, righteous lives. They were the ones who offered the sacrifices when they were supposed to be offered.

They were the ones who kept the law as best they could. Now it all sounds quite promising, doesn't it? We've had Herod, this evil man, but then we've been introduced to this double priestly family, if you like.

We're told that they're righteous people. We're told that they follow God closely and anticipation's building. But then verse 7 crushes all of that in just a few words.

[21 : 51] Yet they had no child. To have a child in ancient Israel was a sign of blessing. It was a sign of God's favor. That's what Psalm 127 reminded us of, wasn't it?

As we sang it together, it reminded us that sons are a precious heritage, a blessing from the Lord. I think we've become so familiar with this narrative that Luke gives us that this loses its impact on us. Because here are this couple who are righteous. Here are this couple who follow God. Here are this couple who try to do everything according to God's law. And we assume that they would be blessed by God.

As the people first read it, they would assume that God would bless this couple greatly. And yet here they are having no children. Here they are, as Elizabeth puts it later on, a reproach among the nations.

And it serves to remind us, friends, that sometimes bad things, sometimes painful things happen to us because we live in a sinful fallen world. Elizabeth and Zechariah here were not being punished for their sin.

[23 : 06] They were, as Luke tells us, righteous people. They hadn't done anything wrong. And yet they still suffered this immense pain of barrenness. They endured the mocking and scorn of their friends.

They endured the whisper of everyone in the community despite the fact that they were righteous before God. Despite the fact that they followed God's laws and commands.

We shouldn't be too quick to jump to the conclusion that when something bad happens that it's the punishment of God. Sometimes bad things happen to us.

Hard things, difficult things, painful things happen to us because we live in a world corrupted by sin. Because we live in a world that is out of kilter with itself and out of kilter with its maker. So that's the purpose of the book. That's the pain of barrenness. But then thirdly, we want to see the purpose of the boy.

[24 : 12] The purpose of the boy. And we see that in verses 8 through 17. 8 through 17. The purpose of the boy. So we've been introduced to this family.

We've seen their pain. We've seen the kind of scars that they're carrying around if you like. But notice what happens in verse 8. While he was serving as a priest before God when his division was on duty, Zechariah continues his day-to-day life if you like.

Zechariah continues his ministry before God. There were 24 divisions of priests who each served twice for a week of the year. So it's kind of during one of these week-long periods of service.

It's one of these week-long times when Zechariah's tribe is on duty. when his division is on duty. And he's chosen by law to enter the temple of the Lord.

Now this is a once-in-a-lifetime kind of experience. This is the sort of thing that only you really only got to do once. There were probably people there gathered who never got to go in before the Lord.

[25 : 20] And yet here was Zechariah with this opportunity. Notice how the Lord controls the history here. Even the history of his own people. It just so happened that Abijah happened to be on duty that week.

It just so happened that the lot should fall on Zechariah. It happened because this was the plan and the purpose of the Lord for Zechariah. There's nothing, friends, that happens to us this morning. Nothing, friends, that happens to us this morning that takes God by surprise. He knows what he's doing. He is the Lord of history.

So the people are outside. Zechariah's inside. He's inside praying. He's inside offering the incense. The people are outside praying. And verse 11, when an angel of the Lord appears to him and stood on the right side of the altar of incense.

Zechariah, when confronted by this angel, when this angel appears to him, what's his response? I think it's a natural response, isn't it? Verse 12, Zechariah was troubled when he saw him and fear fell upon him.

[26 : 33] But the angel, as we're going to see time and time again in these opening verses of Luke, these opening chapters of Luke, what we see time and time again, when the angel of the Lord, when the messenger of the Lord comes, people are afraid.

But the angel brings peace. Look, don't, don't be afraid. Don't worry. God knows who you are. God knows that you're righteous.

But what else does the angel assure him of in verse 13? Don't be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Now what prayer is this?

Is this the prayer that Zechariah has just immediately offered? Is this the prayer that he's been offering for all his life? In short, we don't have a definitive answer.

My own interpretation, my own take on it is that this is undoubtedly a prayer for a son, given what the angel says next. The angel says, the Lord has heard your prayer. Your prayer has been heard and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.

[27 : 46] Now if those two statements go together then it seems natural, doesn't it, that Zechariah has just been praying for a son. Some people will say, well, this is quite a serious responsibility, this is quite a serious task that Zechariah has just been given.

It's quite a serious thing for the lot to have him fallen upon him, so why would he be asking for something as trivial as a son? Why would he trouble the Lord with such a frivolous request? But this is a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Zechariah knows that this won't happen again and he knows his Bible. He knows about Abraham who though he was 99 years old had a son. he knows about Hannah and Elkanah that we read about here.

He knows about Manoah in the book of Judges. He knows that God answers prayer in unexpected ways and so with this once in a lifetime opportunity he prays that God would do the impossible for him.

You always get those emails, don't you, promising a once in a lifetime opportunity. Usually it's to do with money. You know, you'll get an email saying if you invest a thousand pounds with us somehow magically in two weeks time it's going to be worth a million quid.

[29 : 09] I have to say usually I pass on those opportunities. But this was a genuine once in a lifetime opportunity for Zechariah and so he unburdens his heart before the Lord.

it's good to be reminded friends, isn't it, that when we pray that there's nothing that is impossible for God to do, nothing too hard that we can ask for God to do, even in the face of hopeless situations, even in the face of things that seem incredibly difficult, we can come to God knowing that he is all powerful, that he is able to act.

maybe you've been praying for that unbelieving relative for years and you're tempted to give up thinking well what's the point, what good is it doing, what purpose is it serving?

Well the Lord can do the impossible even in that relative's life. Maybe you're praying for that medical diagnosis that doesn't seem quite so good, that seems without hope.

Well don't give up. Because God can do more than we can ask or imagine. Prayer is powerful at its work and we can bring to the God of the universe our cares and concerns, we can unburden our hearts before God in prayer and know that he hears us.

[30 : 41] And know that he answers us. Notice the purpose of the boy then, verse 15. What does the angel tell Zechariah?

he will be great before the Lord, who 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.

He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

What's all of this getting to? Where's all of this taking us to? What according to the angel, what according to Luke then is the purpose of Zechariah's son? He's going to be the forerunner of the Christ.

He's going to be the forerunner of the Messiah. He will have the spirit from his mother's womb. He will turn the hearts of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, to the disobedient to the wisdom of the just and make a people ready for the Lord.

[32 : 02] He's the one, as Isaiah puts it, who's making straight paths. He's the one, the voice calling in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. He's making ready a people who will be ready to meet the Messiah.

Are people ready to meet the Christ? Are people ready to meet the Lord's chosen King? That's his purpose. That's his job.

That's his responsibility. Don't you just love that? Here's this old couple, they're righteous.

They're blameless before the God. They've obeyed God. They follow God with their whole hearts.

And the Lord says to them, I'm going to give you a son.

Miraculous enough in and of itself. But it's not just going to be any old son. This son will be the forerunner, the preparer for my Messiah, for my chosen King.

[33 : 11] fourthly, finally then, we see the removal of barrenness, the removal of barrenness.

And we see that in verses 18 through 25, 18 down to the end of the section. So Zechariah understandably is perhaps a little bit reluctant to believe the message of the angel.

Well how could something so miraculous, how could something so wonderful happen? I am an old man, my wife is advanced in years, verse 18, and the angel strikes him dumb.

Since you don't believe what God has said, since you have questioned what the Lord has said, then you won't be able to talk until it all comes to pass. The people outside are beginning to get a little bit worried, well, Zechariah's been in there for a wee while now, I wonder what's happened to him.

And then as he comes out they're even more curious because he can't speak. They gesticulate wildly to one another trying to figure out what's going on, trying to figure out what's happened in there.

[34 : 16] And eventually they get the message. He's seen a vision, he's been struck dumb by the Lord, and eventually Zechariah goes home, verse 23, and Elizabeth conceives.

And notice what she says. What does she say, verse 25, thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me to take away my reproach among the people.

The Lord has taken away that shame that she felt in the midst of her people. The Lord has removed the thing that people used to mock her about, to goad her about.

The Lord has taken away her shame in the midst of the people. In Jesus Christ this morning, friends, God has acted to remove our reproach.

God has acted to remove our shame, our sin, our barrenness. God has taken our burden on himself.

[35 : 29] And we can now stand in the midst of the people with our heads held high. Not because of who we are, not because we're righteous, not because we're sinless, but because of Christ.

He has removed our shame and our sin. Who's taken our burden on himself? Maybe you're here this morning and that's what you're struggling with.

You feel ashamed of yourself because you know you haven't lived up to your own standards, let alone God's. You're ashamed of yourself because you think, well, if people really knew what I was like, then they wouldn't want to talk to me.

You feel that weight and burden of your shame and sin. Well, come to Christ and have it lifted. Come to Christ and have it cleansed. Amen.