

The Child who is God

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[0 : 0 0] Now, those of you who read my newsletter this week, yes, anyone read my newsletter? You would have been greeted with the title, When Did Christmas Begin? Now, that's an interesting question, isn't it?

And actually, historians don't really have a definitive answer to that. So, if you Google online, the best way to do research nowadays, you see that the first time Christmas was celebrated on the 25th of December was in the year 336 AD.

It was declared then, not long after, by Pope Julius to be the official date on which Christmas or Christ's birth was to be celebrated. But was Jesus really born on December the 25th?

Well, many people don't think so, and neither do I. They argue, for example, that the sheep were actually out in the fields, remember in chapter 2, when Jesus was born in the manger, and December being winter, it would have been too cold for that to happen.

Some say then that the date of December the 25th is actually more Christians co-opting the date of pagan festivals, turning the worship of the sun, S-U-N, during the winter solstice, to the worship of the sun, S-O-N.

[1 : 1 6] But it's hard to be sure. And for me, I'm not too fussed, really, whether Jesus was born on the 25th or not. What is more important to me isn't the history of celebrating Christmas, but the history of Christmas itself.

And for that, we have the gospel writers like Luke to thank, because they actually recorded for us the events surrounding Jesus' birth. Luke himself begins his gospel like this.

Verse 1, 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, Luke says, 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 you see, Luke has actually done the work of an investigative journalist. He's carefully reviewed the accounts of others. He's interviewed the eyewitnesses.

[2 : 2 2] And then he's come up with an orderly account, so that people like Theophilus can be certain of what they're taught. And so, as Luke says in verse 3, he's gone back to the very beginning.

And he has, as we look at verses 5 to 38. He's gone back to the testimony of two eyewitnesses. First, Zechariah in verses 5 to 25, and then Mary from verses 26 to 38.

Now, both of these accounts are actually intricately connected. Luke carefully presents them as such by highlighting a number of parallel details in both of them.

So I put up a table on the slide here, and you see how there are the many details that go side by side with each other. So, for example, first, both of them were appeared, the angel Gabriel appeared to both of them.

Both are then startled or troubled when he appears, verse 12 and verse 29. Angels are actually fearsome beings. If you've never met one, let me tell you that.

[3 : 2 9] But they're both then assured not to be afraid. Then comes the announcement of the unexpected births. But both the announcements have the same form of words. One is to be called John, and the other to be called Jesus.

Now, I won't go into the rest. You can see that for yourself. But what we're meant to see from the way Luke presents these accounts in parallel is that both births are part of God's single unified plan.

Both are carefully planned events that are initiated by God. God is doing something. Something amazing. And yet, when you first read the accounts, both the choice of Zechariah and Mary seem rather random.

Zechariah just happened to be picked, did you notice, by a lot, to burn incense in the temple. And if you bother to do the calculations, it's actually a very, very small probability.

Each priestly division, Abijah as a division by itself, has around 1,000 priests. And they are rostered to serve once a year. So it's really a one in 1,000 chance for Zechariah to be chosen.

[4 : 40] And in fact, many priests don't ever get to be chosen to go into the temple at all throughout their entire lives. And yet, this is not chance, is it?

As for Mary, there doesn't appear to be anything special about her either that would set her apart from anyone else. In fact, she's said to be a young woman living in Nazareth.

Now, Nazareth is only famous. We all know Nazareth. But it's only famous because of Jesus.

Otherwise, it's actually a pretty obscure town. It's like asking an American where Koo-we-Rup is.

You know, nobody knows, except if you're a Victorian. And all we know about her, when we read the text, is that she's betrothed to a man descended from David.

And yet, as we look at the account and we look more closely, both Zechariah and Mary turn out to be ideal choices for God to use to fulfill his plans and purpose.

[5 : 44] How so? Well, first we see the godliness of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Verse 6. They were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the laws of the Lord blamelessly. But they were also well advanced in years and without children.

And actually, that shouldn't be the case if they were blameless. Children are meant to be a reward for faithfulness. But it's precisely because of this predicament that they're actually ideal choices by God.

For they exemplify what God looks for in his servants. People who recognize their own weaknesses and look to God to supply their needs. So we find, for example, in verse 13, that Zechariah has been praying faithfully to God for this child.

And something similar can also be said of Mary. For young though she was, she was actually a person of great faith. She wasn't overawed by the glory of Gabriel.

But after carefully hearing his words, she trusts in the Lord and submits to his will. So at the very end of our passage in verse 38, Mary answers, I am the Lord's servant.

[6 : 56] May your word to me be fulfilled. Now if you know much about the Old Testament at all, then actually God's choices shouldn't be a surprise to you. Because God has made it a habit throughout history to choose people just like Zechariah and Mary.

Who do you think Zechariah and Elizabeth remind you of? Exactly. Back in Genesis.

All the way back in Genesis. Old, barren, just like Zechariah and Elizabeth. And yet God gave them a son. And then the son, Isaac, he marries Rebekah.

And look what happens in Genesis chapter 25 and verse 21 on the slide. It says, Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was childless or barren. The Lord answered his prayer and his wife Rebekah became pregnant.

So again, there is barrenness. There is prayer. And the Lord answers. And then it's Isaac's son's turn, Jacob. Jacob, second wife, Rachel, if you know, was barren too.

[8 : 03] But again, look at Genesis chapter 13 verse 22 and see what it says there. Then God remembered Rachel. He listened to her and enabled her to conceive. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, God has taken away my disgrace.

You see those words by Rachel at the end there? It's exactly what Elizabeth says herself, isn't it? In verse 25. Look with me in verse 25. It says, In these days he has shown his favor, Elizabeth says, and taken away my disgrace among the people.

So Zechariah and Elizabeth actually come in a long line of people that God chooses for his work. What about Mary? Well, she stands with other notable Old Testament women as well.

Women who, although lowly in position, yet were rich in faith. So women like Ruth, a Moabitess, who chose to follow God rather than the gods of her ancestors.

And what happens? As a result, she became the great-great-grandmother. I think that's right. There could be one more great in there. She became the great-great-grandmother of King David. Or what about Hannah? She was barren and looked down upon.

[9 : 15] But she prayed earnestly for a child. And the Lord blessed her with Samuel, a mighty prophet of God. Of course, Mary exceeds both these women.

For she became the mother of the child who is God. Numerous times, the angel says, You are highly favored. You have found favor with God.

And so you see, God uses both Zechariah and Mary, people that appear to be lowly to the world. And then he achieves the impossible through them.

God uses them both to achieve great things. In this instance, God uses them to bring about his ultimate plan of salvation for the world.

And so now this plan is being revealed through the word of Gabriel to these two eyewitnesses. And so we come to the next section or the next bullet points. God's plan is actually contained in the announcements of these two impossible births.

[10 : 19] Impossible, that is, apart from God. Each testifies to God's faithfulness to his promises. So I want to spend some time looking exactly, looking more closely at these two announcements.

So Gabriel's word comes to Zechariah in verses 13 to 17. While the word to Mary is found in verses 30 to 36. So look with me firstly, verse 13.

Where Gabriel says to Zechariah, Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been answered. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. 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.

[11 : 23] Now listen carefully to this announcement, and it would echo with the words from the Old Testament. Some of you, I'm sure, will recognize that Gabriel is repeating the Lord's promise from none other than the book of Malachi.

Malachi. So, again, look up and listen to what Malachi chapter 4 verse 5 and 6 says. See, I, that is the Lord, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents, or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction. And the thing is this.

After God spoke these words, he actually fell silent. And he stayed silent for more than 400 years. Imagine a son who leaves for a long round-the-world trip, 40 countries in six months or something like that, I don't know.

And before he leaves, he promises mom he would write or text or email. But after he leaves, there's not a word from him. Not after the first day to inform mom that, you know, he's arrived safely at, I don't know, New Zealand or whatever.

[12 : 42] And then a week passes, still no word, then a month, still nothing. The police is informed, and there's a worldwide search for him.

But still, there's no news of him. So mom waits to hear, you know, sitting by the phone, checking her emails. But with each passing day, her hope fades.

Until one day, ping. I don't know how the sound of SMS works, but the first words come through on SMS. He's safe, he's okay.

Imagine what her reactions would be then. Be excitement, isn't it? Overwhelming joy. My son's alive. Well, I think that's what it would have been like for people of Israel.

For a people who regularly heard from the Lord, through his prophets, and then not to hear from him for 400 years, that silence would have been deafening.

[13 : 44] And so Gabriel's momentous word to Zechariah wouldn't have been lost on Luke as he wrote the gospel. They were literally God's first definitive words to Israel since the days of Malachi.

And the thing is, they mirrored exactly God's final words. It's as though God was just picking up where he left off 400 years ago. But God is saying, no, I haven't forgotten my promises.

Remember how I promised before my coming a prophet like Elijah, someone to prepare the people for the Lord? Well, this child which Elizabeth will bear, he's that prophet. He will come under the influence, not of beer or wine, but of the Holy Spirit.

And he will preach repentance to bring my people back to me, to turn them from their disobedience so that they will be ready for me. Friends, I know the effort some of you have put in to prepare for job interviews.

Graduate recruitment is brutal these days, so I hear. You know, role plays, scenarios, all those curly questions you have to answer. Many of you have spent hours and days preparing for that big interview, polishing a CV, buying your first ever business suit.

[15:04] Now imagine how much more preparation then we need if we are going to meet the Lord. This is not a job interview just for a job.

It's going to meet the creator of this world. Did you notice how the Lord's day is described in Malachi? It's a great and dreadful day, isn't it? And that's because if Israel is unprepared, then it will be a dreadful day.

Then the Lord's coming will not be a day of salvation, but will be a day of judgment. Whether there will be rejoicing or weeping depends on the preparation that has been done.

Now, of course, this preparation has nothing to do with wearing the right clothes or being morally perfect or doing enough good works. Mary had none of that, and yet she found favor with God.

Rather, as Mary showed, it's all about being humble before the Lord, being willing to serve the Lord. It's about accepting the king's rule and rejoicing to see his coming.

[16:09] And God, in his great kindness and mercy, he sends a messenger. He sends a prophet like Elijah so that he can prepare the people. He can warn them to repent before it's too late.

Now, if the word to Zechariah announces the child who would prepare people for the Lord, then in our next announcement, Gabriel's word to Mary reveals the child who is God.

Now, again, this announcement too is rich in Old Testament promise. So as I read it from verse 30 onwards, see if you can work out where these promises come from. Okay? Verse 30. Well, any ideas?

There's quite a few passages in there, but I'll just mention two. The first is from 2 Samuel 7, 13 and 14.

Verse 13 and 14. Where this promise is made directly to David. So again, got the verse on the slide. And this is what the Lord says. When your days are over, David, and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, and I will establish his kingdom.

[17:36] He is the one who will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father and he will be my son. So this is a promise that God has already made.

In this announcement, Gabriel is simply reminding Mary of it. The second is from our Old Testament reading today, from Isaiah chapter 9, verse 67. There it says, For to us a child is born, and to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, a child being called Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He will reign on David's throne, establishing and upholding it from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. Now, many people actually in Israel knew these promises. In fact, they pinned their hopes on them. Ever since they returned from exile and they didn't have a king on the throne, they had hoped for a return to the days of King David where Israel would have her own king.

At the same time, they would also know the prophecy in Malachi that the day of the Lord will be preceded by one, a prophet called Elijah. But the thing is, no one expected these promises to be fulfilled in this way, in this one event.

[18:56] And that a human king who sits on the throne of David would actually be God himself. that was the thing that was surprising. That a child will become is God.

That the child is the Son of God, the Son of the Most High. No one expected that God Himself would enter the world not as a conquering king but as a helpless babe.

And it's only in this announcement that this is being revealed. Now, I doubt Mary would have understood everything that day. After all, she's young, probably untrained in the scriptures.

Even Zechariah, who was meant to be an experienced priest, he didn't get it because he responded with unbelief at first. Which, as a result, we find out he's cursed with the loss of speech until the time that John is born.

Mary, on the other hand, even though she didn't understand everything, she actually trusted the word of Gabriel. But I think both Zechariah and Mary would have had time afterwards to reflect on these events and then slowly, with the Spirit's help, they would have understood more fully the plans and purpose of God.

[20 : 15] Mary, in particular, would have heard Gabriel's words in verse 37 to her where Gabriel says, even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age and she who has said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.

And this last sentence she would have grabbed onto, for no word from God will ever fail. For no word from God will ever fail.

Mary would have taken those words to heart, I think. And in the days and years following, she would have witnessed exactly how faithful God was to that promise, that he would not allow his word to fail.

And so, when years later, Luke comes to interview her, she no longer is just an eyewitness to these events. No, she becomes a servant of the word as well.

And that's why in verse 2, Luke actually says that we were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

[21 : 21] They're not two different types of people. they're the one type of person who both witnessed but then became servants of the word as well. They became servants of the word because they saw how no word from God ever failed.

Mary became a servant immediately because she says so in verse 38, I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled. Zechariah, we will see in the next chapter, became a servant too after he was given back his speech.

He prophesied and he praised God. Likewise, John, his son, as he grew up and learned the prophecy regarding himself, he would live according to it. He would proclaim the Lord's coming. He would call people to repent. He would be a servant of the word. And even Jesus too, I would argue, even though he was Lord himself, he too is a servant of the word.

For his whole life was actually dedicated to bringing about the fulfillment of God's promise. He served the word. And then we mustn't forget Luke, of course, because what he did was to diligently record all these things, right?

[22 : 33] And by doing so, he became a servant of the word as well. And so you see, God raised up all of these servants of the word so that we, us here now, can be certain that Jesus is the Son of God.

He is the child who is God. He is the Son of the Most High. So my friends, if there's any one of you here tonight who is not convinced yet that Jesus is God, then let me encourage you to investigate this testimony.

It's found in the Bible. If you don't have a Bible, well, I've got copies of the Gospel of Luke, which I'm happy to give away. Come and get one from me. Read it. Ask about it. So that you may know the true history of Christmas.

As for the rest of us, for those of us who have already believed that Jesus is God, then let me ask you, will you live as Mary did? Will you say in your heart, I am the Lord's servant.

May God's word to me be fulfilled. You know, it actually took courage for Mary to say that because as a pregnant, unmarried woman, she would have been opened to shame and ridicule.

[23 : 48] And yet, when she heard God's amazing plan, she believed the Lord's word and she submitted to his will. She became the bearer of the Son of God. All she had that day, really, was Gabriel's word.

Did you realize? There was nothing else. There was no other proof apart from what Gabriel said that she would be the mother of the Son of God. And so the question is, what about us?

Now, of course, no one here is being asked to give birth to the Son of God. That's not God's word to us. Don't need that anymore. And yet, there's much in God's word that does apply to us, right?

God's word, for example, to us is to be like his Son, to be holy even as God is holy, to forgive even as we are forgiven, to serve the word by proclaiming the good news of Jesus to others, to invite people to Doncaster carols.

That's not in the Bible, but that's an implication of serving the word. And so the list goes on and on, doesn't it? Will we say of each, may your word to me be fulfilled?

[24 : 58] Do we pray that God will accomplish all of these things through us? My prayer is that we will, and we will do it willingly. Friends, Advent, as I said earlier, is that four weeks leading up to Christmas.

And traditionally, it's not actually a time to get ready for Christmas. You know, shop for presents, prepare the turkey. Rather, Advent is actually a time for getting ready for Christ's return, to prepare for his second coming.

To prepare the same way John prepared the people for Christ's first coming. And so during Advent, we are not actually looking back 2,000 years, but we're looking forward as well.

And come Christmas Day when we rejoice and celebrate, we're actually rejoicing that God kept his promises 2,000 years ago and saved us by sending his son Jesus.

And because he did that, we too can trust that he will do it again. That not one word of his will fail.

And that he will send Jesus to come again to bring us to glory.

[26 : 07] So friends, let us be servants of that word. And let us pray, may his word be fulfilled in us. Let's pray. Amen. Father, we thank you for your word, which announces to us that Jesus is the Son of God.

He is the Messiah. He is the one that has come to save us from our sin. We thank you for your word, which gives us certainty because of the careful investigation of people like Luke of the eyewitness accounts that we can know that Jesus did come, he did die, and he did rise from the dead so that we may have life.

Father, give us your spirit just as you did to Zechariah, to Mary, so that we may say like them that we will be the Lord's servants and that the Lord's word will be fulfilled in us.

We pray and ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.