

# A Declaration of Those Things Which Are Most Surely Believed Among Us

## An Expositional Study of **The Gospel According to Luke**

### **Chapter 1- Luke 1:5-13**

#### 3 The Parents of the Baptist- Part 1

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November 2, 2008

### **Luke 1:5-13**

Keep in mind that **The Gospel According to Luke** is the longest and the most detailed of the four completely inspired Gospels of what Jesus said and did while He was on earth. And because of that- I want to take our time as we go through this Gospel because there are so many foundational things- so many nuances- and so many wonderfully rich things that Luke is saying in these first few verses as he begins this great history of redemption- so I want to take the time to make sure that we get all of this.

So since every Word of God is pure- by the testimony of Scripture- and since all Scripture is given to be profitable for us- we want to take our time to really understand the very gripping nature of Luke's beginning of this tremendous Gospel.

So here we are in Luke Chapter 1. And we finished the first four verses last week- which is the prologue- in which we met Luke the physician and Luke the historian and Luke the theologian and then Luke the pastor. And we got a little bit acquainted with the man. And now beginning here with verse 5- the story begins. And as I begin this message- let me just say a few things that will provide some context for us.

Turn in your Bibles to the end of this Chapter to verse 78 and read with me:

**Because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us,**

This is a reference from **Malachi 4:2** concerning the Jewish Messiah. So the “**Sunrise from on High**” that has visited us- actually refers to the birth of Jesus Christ- and the fact that Luke refers to this prophecy from **Malachi** covers the last final hours of darkness that covers the sin cursed earth before the sunrise arrives, or in other words- before the Messiah comes.

And the nighttime for Israel had been long and dark. And that darkness of sin and unbelief not only covered Israel- but had completely covered the whole world- causing the whole world to groan under the terrible weight of that darkness- waiting for the Savior to bring the Light.

This nighttime of darkness had been the common theme that ran through all of Israel's history- a history of calling that began with Abraham, a history of slavery for over 400 years in Egypt, a history of wandering for 40 years in the wilderness, a history of the conquest of the land of Canaan, of the occupation of the land of Canaan, of captivity- the northern kingdom taken captive in 722 B.C., and the southern kingdom taken into Babylon in 586 B.C., a history of the northern kingdom never returning, and the southern kingdom returning 70 years later. All of Israel's long history of coming back out of captivity and trying to rebuild and then only to be oppressed as Greeks invaded and controlled the land, and then as the Romans came and further oppressed them...the long night of Israel's history of the mixture of both blessing and cursing- the long night of Israel's history of faithfulness and apostasy.

And what sustained those who really looked toward God through all those long, long years of darkness was the hope that the dayspring or the sunrise would one day break through and Messiah would come to end it all.

Now this great prophecy of the Sunrise from on high coming to visit Israel is found in the last book of the Old Testament- the last Old Testament Book named after the prophet who wrote it- Malachi. And Malachi promised in the last chapter of the last Old Testament book that the sun...s-u-n...of righteousness would arise with healing in his wings- so let's turn and read Malachi's great prophecy found in **Malachi 4:2**:

**But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall.**

Now the phrase “**the Sun of Righteousness**” that Malachi prophesied in Hebrew was then translated into Greek by Luke in **Luke 1:78**. And in 1611- the King James translators translated into English what Luke wrote in Greek to read:

**... whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us,**

And so based upon the Holy Spirit Sovereignly giving Luke the correct interpretation of what Malachi was prophesying 400 years earlier- Luke is telling us that Malachi was telling the world that *“Sunrise is coming...sunrise is coming. The long darkness that has covered the world is not permanent- Messiah is coming.”*

Now it is usually true that the night is the darkest just before the dawn. And for the 400 years since the last prophet of God said the sun of righteousness will one day rise- for 400 years since that time- God was silent.

For over 400 year since Malachi- there was no prophet in Israel. There was no prophet in Judah. And there was no Revelation from God to Man. Therefore it was the darkest time of all.

For 400 years- Heaven was silent. The prayers of God’s people continued to go up- but it seemed as though they hit a brass Heaven and bounced back to earth. And Israel sunk deeper and deeper into depression and darkness- oppressed by the Greeks whose ruler Antiochus Epiphanes actually had the unmitigated gaul to step into the sacred Holy of Holies- the holy place of the temple, and desecrate those places- even sacrificing a pig on the altar...a time when the Gentile Greeks came in and brought their pagan gods and their pagan theology and mingled it in that sacred land and with the people of Israel. And the Greeks were followed by the Romans- with all their idolatries. This made the dark depression of Israel all the greater. And as much as the Jewish people cried out to God- God didn't speak and no prophet appeared.

And the only comfort that could be given to the people of God was that God had promised through Malachi that one day- the Sun of Righteous- the dayspring or sunrise- would come and He would dispel the darkness and God would be with His people.

For 400 years the people of God looked at every sunrise- hoping that it would be today that Messiah would come to deliver them out of the terrible darkness that had descended on them by the pagans who ruled their land, and then with every sunset – they muttered to themselves, *“Well, maybe tomorrow”*.

Where was the sun of righteousness? No one dreamed it would be 400 years from the giving of the prophecy to its fulfillment. Where was the day of which God had also promised in **Malachi 4:3**, when He said:

**You will tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing,” says the LORD of hosts.**

Where was the day when Righteousness would triumph over evil? The prophet said it will come- the Light will break- the Dawn will come- the Sun will rise.

Malachi didn't know it- but he was referring, of course, to the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of Israel and of the whole world. And Malachi- that last prophet- also said that that Savior, that Deliverer, that sun of righteousness that will rise, that one who will bring righteousness to prevail over evil will, in fact, be the Lord Himself because Malachi wrote in **Malachi 3:1**:

**“Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts.**

So the Lord of Hosts says the Lord is coming. And so we know by what Malachi says here that the One Who comes- will not be as Moses or David or Joshua- but this One Who comes- this Messiah- this Deliverer- will, in fact, be God Himself.

And that is how the Old Testament ends. It ends with the Promise of Light, the Promise that the Sun of Righteousness, the brilliance from on High, the Light of the world, the Messiah, the Lord Savior, God Himself will come and shatter the consuming darkness.

But it has now been over 400 years that have come and gone since Malachi's inspired Words were uttered in about 430 B.C. And still no prophet, no further Word from God, no appearing, and no Light.

And things have gotten worse- not better. And Israel not only sunk deeper into depression because of oppressing nations occupying her land- but what was far worse was that God's people had sunk deeper into sin and apostasy so much that by the time the **Gospel of Luke** begins- Judaism as it existed in the land of Israel was fully apostate. It had abandoned the true message of the Old Testament for a false one, engaging itself in works-righteousness, self-righteousness, all those things which God hates. So Israel was not only dark from pagan invaders who had desecrated its holy ground- but now she was dark in her own soul.

So where was the light? Where was the sun? Where was the dawn of redemption that had been promised by God? Where was the hope of every Jewish heart?

Now it's important to realize that there is a critical element of the predictions that Malachi made that can't be overlooked. Yes, he said the sun of righteousness is coming, but he also said this...

*"Before He comes- before the sun rises- before the Messiah- the Lord Savior comes- there will come a prophet to announce His arrival- a messenger- an herald- an announcer."* He's often called a forerunner. Malachi said this in **Malachi 3:1**:

**Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me.**

So there's coming a messenger to announce the arrival of the Sun of Righteousness- to announce the coming of the Dawn.

In fact, the prophet Isaiah spoke of him. Isaiah said that this messenger will be a **"voice crying in the wilderness"**, crying out to clear the way for the Lord, telling us to make smooth the highway for my God. So both prophets- Isaiah and Malachi- said that *before* the Sun arises- *before* the Messiah comes- there will first come a prophet pointing toward Him.

And when the Messiah's forerunner arrives- when that prophet messenger comes- the silence of Heaven will be broken with the Voice of God and the Darkness of earth will be shattered with the Light of the Savior and Redeemer.

So now we know that the world will know when the Messiah arrives. How will they know? Because Messiah will be preceded by His forerunner. Before the Sun of Righteousness comes, before the Sun rising from on High comes- this prophet- this forerunner will announce the arrival of the Messiah.

And the silence of Heaven will be broken when the forerunner arrives. And then will come the Messiah and the eternal healing of Salvation. And so because Luke is such a careful historian and because he is so comprehensive in what he wants to cover- he has to begin his story of Jesus with the arrival of that forerunner. And that's precisely what he does.

Now please turn and read again **Luke 1:5-11:**

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

**6 They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.**

**7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.**

**8 Now it happened *that* while he was performing his priestly service before God in the *appointed* order of his division,**

**9 according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.**

**10 And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.**

**11 And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense**

And with the appearing of this angel- 400 years of the silence of God was broken. Now this was just another day in the life of Zacharias. He was doing on that day what he had done countless times before. There was no warning or sign or signal that this was to be the day when the prophecy of Malachi would be fulfilled. But God has spoken and His Word will never fail, and with the sudden and dramatic appearance of this angel to Zacharias- 400 years of silence is broken and God is now going to speak to Man again. Now let's read **Luke 1:12&13:**

**12 Zacharias was troubled when he saw *the angel*, and fear gripped him.**

**13 But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.**

So this is where the story of Salvation begins. It begins with the birth of John- who is the forerunner to the Messiah. And at this point, before we can go further in the story, I have to cover some things that are very critical and fascinating. It is essential to begin the Story of Salvation with the story of John the Baptist for several reasons, let me give them to you and please make note of them:

**1. It Connects the Old Testament with the New Testament.**

And this is a huge theological point- so please write this down. We must understand that the Old and New Testaments do not describe two different religions. It is not true to say that there is the religion of Judaism and the religion of Christianity. That is not true.

Both the Old and New Testaments are one single Revelation from God with fundamental continuity- telling the whole Story of Redemption of only *one* religion, *one* faith, one Truth- and that is faith in the one true living God- eternally manifested in three Persons- which includes God the Son- the Lord Jesus Christ. The Old and New Testaments are one complete Revelation from God.

If you read and study the Old Testament without the benefit of understanding the New- you will get off base very quickly. And if you read and study the New Testament without prior knowledge of the Old- you will also get off base very quickly. The Old is incomplete and not finished without the New and the New makes no sense at all- without the Old.

- 2. Luke begins the story of Salvation with John the Baptist and not Jesus because that proves that the New Testament is as much inspired Scripture as the Old.** You see, the New Testament story of Salvation links John the Baptist as being the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and that shows the accuracy of Scripture's prophecies and the accuracy of Scripture's predictions. Therefore, we understand that the Old Testament-

which is inspired- makes predictions which the New Testament fulfills. Therefore the New Testament is as much inspired Scripture as the Old.

Now beginning the story of Salvation with John the Baptist also is important because John the Baptist's birth was the first point at which God spoke after a 400 year silence. It is the initial appearance of angels after a dry season of over 4 centuries. **Luke 1:11** says:

**And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense.**

And so with this appearing- the silence was broken. With this appearing- 400 years with no Word from God is ended- and the Story of Salvation began.

And so, Luke wants to take us right back to the first place where God acted decisively and supernaturally and immediately in history, and so he has to go back to John. Not only is this the first place where angels appear- but angels will continue to appear all through the two birth narratives- the birth of John and the birth of Jesus- because as we already know- the angels of God play a very important role all through both the announcement of both John and Jesus as well as being very active for several years after they were born.

So it is true to say that the birth of John was indeed a miracle. John was certainly not born of a virgin- like Jesus was- but John's birth was without doubt- miraculous.

And so by telling us the full story of the birth of John- the details of the miracle of his birth and the involvement of angels with a message from God- Luke is careful to begin the story where the story really begins where God first initiates supernatural activity after a darkness and silence that had lasted for over 400 years.

Furthermore- and this is also very critical- Luke's details about John the Baptist proves that he is the fulfillment of the forerunner of the Messiah that had been prophesied long ago. And it establishes that fact beyond any reasonable argument.

And that is vital because if we know who the forerunner is- then we will also know who the Messiah is because the forerunner will identify the Messiah to us. So by establishing beyond any doubt who



the fulfillment of Isaiah's and Malachi's prophecy is concerning the forerunner – proves also beyond any reasonable doubt who the Messiah is. And this is the systematic logic that Dr. Luke uses throughout this entire Gospel.

And as we will see in the near future- there was a day when Jesus came down to the Jordan River where John was baptizing and John turned toward Him and said,

**"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."**

So John- the man who Luke proves is the forerunner and the fulfillment of several Old Testament prophecies clearly identifies Jesus of Nazareth as being the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah.

So by establishing who the forerunner was- then you also can establish Who the Messiah is.

So that is why Luke begins his Story of Salvation that he writes to Theophilus with John and not Jesus. Luke wants to systematically prove to Theophilus and to everyone else that since John is the forerunner- then Jesus must be the Messiah.

So by interviewing the mother of Jesus, and perhaps even Zacharias and Elizabeth, and those who knew them- Luke has first hand eyewitness information about the angelic announcement of John's birth, the miracle of his birth to a woman past her time, the story of the angelic announcement of Jesus' birth, and the miracle of Jesus' birth.

And this painstaking approach by Luke at getting all of this correctly provides irrefutable proof- to a much greater degree- of the fantastic claims made in the New Testament than with any other ancient manuscript ever produced- including all of the ancient histories ever written.

Now it is interesting to know that there are all kinds of nuances in the way that these events are laid out that we can find in Luke's literary style- which I'm not going to get into. We'll leave that for some other time. But there are so many incredibly and marvelous insights expressive of the inspired brilliance of Luke as a historian that I can't resist taking you in to some of them.

For example- Luke doesn't begin his story like a fiction book. He doesn't begin by saying, *"Once upon a time..."* Rather, Luke begins his

Story of Salvation with a provable and verifiable fact of history when he says in verse 5:

**In the days of Herod, king of Judea,**

Now the discussion that I had with my wife yesterday was whether I would ever get past that one statement this morning- and I want you to know that I will indeed get past this- you'll be glad to know. But that's where we have to start because that's the setting and timing of the Story of Salvation- in the days of Herod, the king of Judah.

And King Herod was not a fictional character- he was a very real king who ruled during a very specific time in history. And what is particularly interesting about Herod is that evidently he was very impressed with himself because he left us with an enormous amount of information when he died.

And Luke knows that Theophilus- being a Roman dignitary- has access to historical records books and manuscripts and was aware of politics and Governors and rulers and the like, and so he was aware to some degree of this man named Herod.

Now this Herod was actually known as Herod I in terms of the fact that he was the first of a long list of "Herods" who ruled in one way or another in the land of Palestine. But he commonly called himself Herod the Great...Herod the Great- the "king" of Judea.

And permit me to give you a little background so you kind of know this man a little bit. Herod the Great was the first of several "Herods" mentioned in the New Testament. One of the struggles that a New Testament student must go through is to try to sort out all the different "Herods" that are mentioned in the Bible and this is where it all begins- with this guy.

Julius Caesar- the Emperor of Rome had appointed Herod's father- a man named Antipater- to be what was called a "Procurator", or what we would call a "Governor" of Judea under the Roman occupation. What the Romans did in the development of the Great Roman Empire was they just took over all kinds of nations and when they established their control militarily of those nations they then placed someone in power there who was a representative of the Roman government so they would keep control.

Antipater was selected to do that in the land of Judea under the Roman occupation. He was the Roman appointed Governor in that land.

And Antipater then managed to have his son- Herod- appointed "Prefect" or Sheriff of Galilee- which was the northern part of Palestine. Now in that office- Herod was quite successful. He knew where he was going. He was a smart guy. He planned his strategy very well to achieve his goals. And one of the problems that the Romans had to deal with in the land of Palestine was domestic terrorism- so you see that there really is nothing new under the sun.

You see, dear friends, that terrorism in the Middle East didn't start in our day. There were all kinds of Jewish terrorists back 2,000 years ago. Some of them known as the Sacarii- because that was the term for little sword. They were dagger carriers who went around in the crowds and when they found a Roman soldier or citizen or dignitary- they would assassinate them. There were terrorist activities going on in Galilee as well. And Herod was very brutal and swift in dealing with those guerilla bands of terrorists. He was so successful that he garnered an awful lot of good will from the Roman Government.

The Parthians- another terrorist group came into that area, and actually invaded Palestine rather formidably while Herod was in that northern area- and so Herod fled to Rome for safety.

And while he was at Rome- because the Romans liked him- Herod talked Octavian and Antony into officially naming him as "the king of the Jews", and they gave him an army so he could go back and destroy the Parthians- which he did.

So Herod invaded Palestine the next year and after several years of fighting- he drove out the Parthians and established himself as the king of the Jews throughout all Palestine. The year was 37 B.C.

Now this created a problem for Herod because he was not Jewish. But even worse than that- he was an Edomite. And you will remember that Edom had been cursed by God. So Herod was an Edomite which was also called an Idumaeen. And Herod worried about that. He was very concerned about his reputation and status with the Jews- so he married a Jewish girl by the name of Mariamne.

Now this was not just *any* Jewish girl- but she was the heir to the Jewish Hasmonaean house, a very, very well-established and noble family. And Herod did this in order to make himself more acceptable to

the Jews that he now ruled. He was a clever man. He was a very capable warrior. History tells us he was an immensely gifted orator and he was a diplomat.

For example- in times of plenty- Herod taxed the people severely and so when there was severe economic hardship- he had a surplus and from that surplus he gave generously to the people- not because he was a kind or godly man- but simply to acquire favor with the Jews. It was simply a political ploy to cause the Jews to look the other way when he did other things that were horrible.

So always be careful about anyone in Government taxing the stew out of you and then giving some of your own money back as though they are doing something nice for you.

Now in 25 B.C., there was a great famine in the land of Palestine and Herod- being the diplomat that he was- melted down some of the most beautiful objects in his palace to buy food for the poor, and thus in some way endeared himself to the people. He also built theaters and he built race tracks and he built other athletic and entertainment structures in the land of Palestine- the ruins of which you can even see today if you go there.

He also revived Samaria which had kind of fallen into a waste place. He built the most beautiful port city of Caesarea which you can still visit and see elements of his buildings there. He named it in honor of his benefactor, Caesar Augustus, which was the title of Octavian.

He embellished the cities along the trade route like Damascus and Tyre and Sidon and even the city of Rhodes. And he even contributed to the rebuilding of the great city of Athens. So Herod was very successful as a leader and a ruler. Herod is also the man who built the remarkable and frankly almost impregnable fortress of Masada- down by the Dead Sea- elevated high up on a mountain top- where in A.D. 73 nearly a thousand Jewish defenders committed suicide rather than be captured by the Roman general Flavius Silva who had besieged Masada. Masada was actually the summer home of Herod.

Now those are some of his great achievements- but keep in mind that Herod was cruel and merciless and vicious beyond description. He was incredibly jealous- completely suspicious of everybody and lived in constant fear that someone was going to take his position and power. Herod feared every real threat to his power and he also feared every threat that was just manufactured in his own mind.

For example, he had the high priest, the Jewish high priest Aristobulus, drowned. And that was bad enough- but this was his wife's brother which made it worse- his wife wasn't too happy about that- and by the way- Herod attended the funeral of the brother-in-law that he had drowned and even wept in a pretense of affection- and then to silence his wife about what he had done- Herod killed her. And then knowing that mother-in-laws can be somewhat of a problem at times- he killed his mother-in-law, and fearing that his own two sons might tell the truth about him- Herod also murdered his two sons- just a real champ of a guy. Five days before his death- which is about two years after Jesus was born- Herod finally had his third son executed.

Now one of the greatest evidences of Herod's blood-thirstiness and his insane cruelty was having the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem all rounded up and imprisoned just before his death. He knew he was dying. He got all of these nobles and put them all in prison. He knew that no one would mourn his death because everyone knew him as a slaughtering, massacring monster. So he knew that no one would mourn his death so he ordered that at the moment of his death all of those nobles who were in prison be instantly executed so at least there would be mourning in Jerusalem when he died...even if it wasn't for him. Herod knew what we know today- that the press would put a spin on it.

But that barbaric act- along with all the others- really pales in the light of the most horrifying thing that Herod ever did. In **Matthew 2**- the Bible says that three kings came to worship Jesus and stopped into Jerusalem to ask where "the king of the Jews" was. Since Herod had gotten Octavian to name him "the king of the Jews"- Herod got very angry when he learned that the three kings were talking about a baby boy.

So in order to make sure that he killed this other "King of the Jews"- Herod had all the male children from two years old and under slaughtered in one of the most horrible holocausts the world has ever seen. How paranoid does man have to be to fear a child under the age of two so much that he had them all killed? But that was Herod.

And so here in **Luke 1:5**- the good doctor begins the Story of Salvation with these words-

**In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah;**

So now Luke goes from Herod to another man named, Zacharias. So Luke takes us from one of the most vicious tyrants the world has ever seen to one of the most humble and godly men the world has ever seen- from the royal king to a common priest.

Now the name Zacharias appears on behalf of thirty different people throughout Scripture- so it is a very common name- and it means "God remembers" in Hebrew. It's a wonderful name- God remembers- because one of the things that the Jews liked to celebrate was the fact that God remembered everything about them and that was a part of His care over them.

So now we meet the first real character in Luke's Story of Salvation. And he really isn't anyone particularly notable because there were 18,000 priests in Palestine at the time. So Zacharias was just one priest in 18,000 who lived somewhere out in a village and carried on his priestly duties like all of his other 18,000 fellow priests.

But *this* priest, this *one* priest among 18,000 others, this *one* Zacharias out of 30 others becomes such an important character in the Story of Salvation that it is really remarkable. And actually we're going to look at five things about him flowing all the way down to verse 25.

Now we won't get through all of that today but by the time we get down to verse 25- we will have seen five things about Zacharias:

1. His Personal Righteousness
2. His Priestly Responsibility
3. His Prophetic Revelation
4. His Faithless Response
5. His Sudden Rebuke

But let's start with the first one:

### **1. His Personal Righteousness.**

Now really and truly- Zacharias was a very remarkable guy. He was a priest- but nothing more notable than a priest for Luke describes him in **Luke 1:5** as just "**a priest.**"

Now remember that Judea was under Roman occupation- it was under the fearful leadership of Herod. But even though they were under Roman domination- the Jews, still had the right to practice their religion freely- so the priesthood was in full force and there were 18,000 priests actually functioning within the Jewish religion.

Now let me tell you a little bit about how a priest functions. The nation of Israel is a theocratic kingdom- a theocracy. America is a democracy- in that the people rule- but Israel was a theocracy- in that it was ruled by God. And God mediated that rule for the officers of the kingdom- who were the priests.

And all the priests were sons of Aaron. The call to be a priest came through Aaron's loins. Aaron had two sons- Eleazar and Ithamar, in particular, and out of *their* loins came others who are identified with the priestly order. Aaron was of the tribe of Levite- so all the priests were of that same tribe which mean they were all Levites – so the priesthood was the *Levitical* priesthood.

Every male child that came forth from the family of Aaron was considered a part of the priesthood. They were the agents of God. They basically operated the theocratic kingdom. They took care of the public issues and the public events and the teaching of Scripture.

To be a priest then was to be honored. It was to be a representative of God. It was to be a son of Aaron- if you will- and it was to be a descendant of the one who was the original high priest who was to be set apart by God for holy service. It was to be able to go into the Temple and offer sacrifice on behalf of the people. So it was a very noble and respected position. The priests were the “pronouncers” of the blessings of God. They were servants of the temple. It was the priests who were the butchers who actually did all of the sacrificing of the animals for the people.

And it was the priests who interpreted the Scriptures. It was the priests who taught the Scriptures and who counseled people out in their villages where they lived.

And Zachariah was one of them. And during this time- there were about 18,000 of them- in fact- there were so many of them throughout all of the history of Israel- that the priests were divided into 24 “orders” or schools. Back in **1Chronicles 24**- before the kingdom even divided into the northern and southern kingdom- during the reign of King David- he divided the priesthood into 24 orders because Eleazar and Ithamar- two

of Aaron's sons- had 24 sons between them- so they just made those sons- all 24 of them- the head of an order of priests, and their sons and their sons and their sons and all the way down the line would belong to those orders. So there were 24 orders of priests.

And the eighth order of priests was named for the eighth son of Eleazar- who was called- Abijah. And so Luke tells us here in the middle of verse 5 that Zacharias was a priest-

### **... of the division of Abijah ...**

or after the order of the priestly *division* named after the eighth son of Eleazar- called Abijah. And this is another historical fact that Luke is giving to those who read this account. So Luke wanted Theophilus to be able to go to the Temple records and find the priestly division of Abijah and look up the name Zacharias so that Theophilus and everybody else who reads this Gospel Record would know that these things were true.

Now why was it divided into 24 orders? Because there were so many priests- they couldn't all serve in the Temple at the same time and they had to be divided down. And here's how that worked:

A priest would serve in the Temple for two different weeks a year. That was it. During the whole year you would only serve one week at one time of the year and another week at another time of the year, and that was how a priest was brought into Temple service. Because there were so many priests- you only were able to serve two different weeks a year in the Temple at Jerusalem.

Now all the priests came to the Temple for Passover. And during that time- it wasn't uncommon for as many as a quarter of a million lambs to be slaughtered. And if 18,000 priests went about to slaughter 250,000 lambs in just one week- that would be a huge undertaking.

Now remember that the priests were also butchers. And during their service- they were covered with blood from the top of their head all the way to the soles of their feet. Now keep in mind that Hebrews 10 tells us that the blood of animals did not remove one single sin from the children of Israel- not one. All that the sacrifice of animals did was to hold back God's Anger against their sin until the Lamb of God could come.



So the priests slaughtered animals all day long just to keep the Wrath of God away from them for just one more day. And so with this in mind- that's where we find Zacharias at this particular time.

Now look at the end of **Luke 1:5**:

**... and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth.**

So here Luke introduces us to the wife of Zacharias- a godly woman by the name of Elisabeth. And so here are the first two major characters of Luke's Story of Salvation- Zacharias and Elisabeth- the mother and father of John the Baptist.

And Luke gives us some information about her too. He tell us that Elisabeth was **"from daughters of Aaron"**, meaning that she was a direct descendent of the first High Priest- Moses' brother- Aaron.

So Zacharias did not marry an unbelieving Gentile and neither did he find a girl who was simply a Jew in name only. But Zacharias sought out a wife who was as dedicated to the Lord as he was- a believer- who actually walked with God herself. So Luke tells us that Zacharias' wife was the daughter of a priest. And since all male descendants of Aaron were priests- that means that Elisabeth's father was also a priest- and her brothers were priests- and her uncles were priests- and her grandfather and her great-grandfather were all priests. Every male in her family were all priests. Would to God that all of the young men in the Church of our day would seek out a wife who was as godly as this woman was.

So Elisabeth would have grown up familiar with the Jewish priestly function. Now this also means that Zacharias chose one of the most godly women he could find to be his wife. And I think this speaks volumes about his devotion to the priesthood and his devotion to God and to his priestly duty. He married a girl who was the most familiar with the devout involvement in the religion of Judaism.

And we know that she must have come from a pretty good family- a pretty serious family of priests- because they named her Elisabeth. And besides Elisabeth being a beautiful name- according to **Exodus 6:23**- Elisabeth was the name of Aaron's wife.

So Zacharias' wife was named after the wife of the original high priest. And that tells you something else about this family that she

came from. These are people who are very serious about their religion. These are people who are serious about priestly function. And by the way, Elizabeth means "My God is an oath," or "My God is faithful," or some variation of that. So the name, Elisabeth, celebrates the faithfulness of God. It extols God.

So here is this man- just a common ordinary garden-variety vanilla priest out in some village somewhere, serious enough about his priesthood that he finds a woman to marry who has her entire life filled with priests- who will understand his life and his love for the priesthood and his love for God. And one who comes from such a devoted family as to have been named after the wife of the original high priest. So this is a remarkable couple.

And this certainly provided tremendous heritage for John, didn't it? In a time of Jewish apostasy and a time of Jewish defection from true worship of God- a time of hypocrisy- a time of self-righteousness- this couple was seriously devout. And we know that specifically because of what Luke tells us in **Luke 1:6**:

**They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.**

Now there's so much to say about this. They were both righteous in the sight of God- so they weren't like the other hypocrites. The hypocrites were righteous in the sight of men- the hypocrites were concerned about how they looked to men.

And that's why in **Matthew 23**- Jesus gave those hypocritical priests the most scathing damnation that any group in the entire Bible ever received- much harsher than anything said to Sodom and Gomorrah.

#### **Matthew 23:13-39**

**13 "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.**

**14 [Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.]**

- 15 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.
- 16 “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, *that* is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.’
- 17 You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold?
- 18 And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, *that* is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.’
- 19 You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering?
- 20 Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears *both* by the altar and by everything on it.
- 21 And whoever swears by the temple, swears *both* by the temple and by Him who dwells within it.
- 22 And whoever swears by heaven, swears *both* by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.
- 23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.
- 24 You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!
- 25 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence.
- 26 You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.
- 27 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.
- 28 So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.
- 29 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous,
- 30 and say, ‘If we had been *living* in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in *shedding* the blood of the prophets.’

- 31 So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.**
- 32 Fill up, then, the measure of *the guilt* of your fathers.**
- 33 You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?**
- 34 “Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city,**
- 35 so that upon you may fall *the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.***
- 36 Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.**
- 37 “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.**
- 38 Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!**
- 39 For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, ‘BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!’”**

Now in this one passage- Jesus calls these priests “hypocrites” every time. And Jesus also says that these self righteous priests were everything from “blind guides” to “fools” and said that they were nothing but whitened tombs who were responsible for killing all the prophets and for destroying the widows.

And yet the very same Lord who pronounced all this damnation on *these* priests said that Zacharias and Elisabeth were both righteous before God and kept the commandments of the Lord- faithfully.

And so I am going to have to stop on that note- that Luke said that both Zacharias and Elisabeth were righteous.

Let's come and pray

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The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Be watchful and quicken your pace. Soli Deo Gloria. For the Glory of God alone.