

**LUKE 1-12**  
**FOR YOU**



**MIKE MCINLEY**  
**LUKE 1-12**  
**FOR YOU**



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## **Luke 1 – 12 For You**

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## SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Luke 1 – 12 For You*:

**To read.** You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

**To feed.** You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

**To lead.** You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

*Carl Laferton, Series Editor*

*For Dan and Courtney Gifford,  
with love and gratitude for a friendship that  
can be measured in decades.*

**Bible translations used:**

- NIV: New International Version, 2011 translation (this is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated)
- ESV: English Standard Version

## INTRODUCTION TO LUKE 1 - 12

The Gospel of Luke was written to give Christians certainty. That alone makes it a priceless part of Scripture, and a must-read for you and me.

Luke is clear that he was not an eyewitness of the events he describes. This sets him apart from the other **Gospel**<sup>†</sup> writers; Matthew and John were part of Jesus' inner circle, and reliable tradition holds that Mark's Gospel is the record of Peter's testimony about Jesus. Luke, however, did not come on the scene until the time of the events that he records for us in his "sequel," the book of Acts, where he suddenly begins to write in the first person plural ("we" and "us") about the things that he did as a companion of the **apostle** Paul (see Acts 16:10-17).

Luke's Gospel account is the only one that begins with a personal address. We do not know much about Theophilus, the man to whom Luke addressed both his Gospel (**1:3\***) and Acts (see Acts 1:1). Presumably he was both a Christian who had been taught about Jesus (Luke **1:4**) and also wealthy enough to commission Luke to undertake his massive writing project. We barely know more about Luke, and most of what we do know comes from the three brief mentions he received in the letters of Paul. Paul calls him "the doctor" and "our dear friend" in Colossians 4:14. In Philemon v 24 Paul calls him a "fellow worker." At the end of his life Paul mourns those who have abandoned him, saying that, "only Luke is with me" (2 Timothy 4:11).

But Luke's status as an outsider of sorts should not cause us to doubt whether we can trust what he writes. He tells Theophilus (and us) at the outset of his narrative that, having carefully followed these things for quite some time, he has been on a mission to compile an "orderly account" for him (Luke **1:3**) of all "the things that have been fulfilled among us" (**v 1**). Luke expresses no interest in passing on rumors, hearsay, or religious propaganda. He wants his patron

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<sup>†</sup> Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 193).

\* All Luke verse references being looked at in each chapter are in **bold**.

to have confidence that he has received an accurate record of what really happened.

But a historian is only as good as his access to the events that really happened, and so it is natural for us to ask whether our guide to the life of Jesus got his information from reputable sources who were really in a position to know the truth. Luke anticipates our concern and identifies his sources as “eyewitnesses and servants of the word” (v 2). We know that Luke was with Paul at the time of the apostle’s arrest and two-year detention in Jerusalem (Acts 21:17 – 24:27), and it is not unreasonable to speculate this was the period of time when Luke was free to interview these eyewitnesses and gather material for his book.

This explanation of Luke’s research methods helps us to understand why it is that there seems to be so much unique material in the first two chapters of his book. Our guide seems to have had special access to the thoughts and feelings of the people that he writes about; he can tell us what Mary felt (Luke 1:29) or what Elizabeth said in the privacy of her room (v 25). While we might be tempted to dismiss those accounts as a writer taking some artistic license with the facts in order to tell a compelling story, Luke insists at the outset that his account is the product of careful research and an orderly passion for the facts. That is why he is able to offer “certainty” (v 4).

### **Major Themes in Luke’s Gospel**

So, what *are* those things about which we are supposed to have certainty? Here are six recurring, major themes in Luke’s Gospel; keep your eye out for them as we go along:

1. *The ministry of the Holy Spirit.* The Spirit gets prominent billing in Luke’s sequel, the book of Acts. But Luke’s gospel shows us many ways that the third person of the **Trinity** was at work beforehand, preparing us well to see the power of the Spirit unleashed at **Pentecost**. We will see Him at work in the miraculous births of John (1:15) and Jesus (1:35), and in the praises of God’s people

- in response to those arrivals (e.g. 1:41; 2 v 25-27). The Spirit descends on Jesus at his baptism, empowers him for ministry (4:14, 18) and immediately leads him into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan (4:1). Jesus himself rejoices in the Holy Spirit (10:21) and promises his disciples the presence of the Spirit in their times of need (e.g. 12:12; 24:49).
2. *The importance of prayer.* Luke is quick to highlight Jesus' practice of prayer, especially before important moments (e.g. 9:18, 28). He also records three memorable **parables** that touch on the subject of prayer: the parable about the friend who arrives in the middle of the night (11:5-8), the parable of the persistent woman and the judge (18:1-8), and the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector at prayer in the temple (18:9-14). Luke also shows Jesus repeatedly encouraging his followers to pray (e.g. 6:28) and showing them how to do it (11:2-4).
  3. *The joyful praise of God's people.* The first two chapters of Luke read a bit like a Broadway script; people keep interrupting the action by breaking into song! In just chapters 1 and 2, the work of God is greeted with spontaneous words of praise by Mary, Zechariah, the angels, Simeon, and Anna; it is a pattern that continues through the book (e.g. 17:15). Luke uses the verb "rejoice" more than any other author of Scripture.
  4. *God's initiative in the salvation of his people.* Luke's account shows that the life and death and resurrection of Jesus are all a part of a definite plan that God has revealed in the Old Testament and is now unfolding for the salvation of his people (e.g. 4:21; 22:37; 24:44). The marvelous triad of parables in chapter 15 gives a vivid picture of what Jesus means when he says that he has come "to seek and save the lost" (19:10). This Gospel is not anything like a self-help manual; it is the story of a divine rescue mission.
  5. *Jesus' love for outsiders.* Luke seems particularly concerned that his readers should see that the good news about Jesus is not limited to the people that were valued and honored in the society

of that day. As you go through the book, notice how Luke highlights the dignity and value of the following groups of people who would not have been valued in that society:

- **Women:** Luke's portrait of the role of women in the ministry of Jesus is extraordinary. They are faithful and tenacious friends to Jesus when many of the male disciples abandon him (23:27); they are the special objects of Jesus' mercy and compassion (e.g. 7:11-15); they are avid learners (10:39), financial supporters (8:3), and models of true sacrificial giving (21:1-4).
- **Children:** In ancient times, children were not given the prominent place in society that they occupy today. But Luke highlights Jesus' concern for children who were gravely ill (8:41-42), oppressed by demons (9:42) or even—in the case of the young man from Nain—dead (7:11-15). Each one of these children is said to be an only child, and Jesus' mercy toward both the children and their parents is palpable in each of Luke's suspense-filled accounts of their healing.
- **Sinners:** Some of the most vibrant and memorable characters in Luke's Gospel were some of the most disreputable. Zacchaeus was a notorious crook (19:7), and Luke delicately describes the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with her tears as a woman "who lived a sinful life" (7:37). Each, however, is welcomed by Jesus and praised for their extraordinary love and repentance. Some of Jesus' parables in Luke come to a shocking conclusion, as the sinner (the tax collector, the wastrel son) turns out to be the hero while the upright person (the **Pharisee**, the older brother who stayed home) winds up left out of God's **grace**.
- **Foreigners:** While the book of Acts shows the unfolding of God's desire to give his salvation to all the nations, we see glimpses of that plan in Luke's Gospel. The angel declares that the birth of Jesus is good news for the entire earth (2:14), and Simeon says that Jesus will be a light of revelation to the **Gentiles** (2:32). Jesus speaks well of Gentiles (4:25-27) and heals

the servant of a Roman centurion (7:1-10), marveling that he had not found faith like this among the people of Israel.

6. *The cross and resurrection of Jesus.* This is a bit like saying that Macbeth is a story about a Scottish king, but Luke is obviously concerned that we understand the importance of the cross and resurrection. The other three Gospel writers use the word “salvation” once between them (John 4:22), but Luke uses it repeatedly in his Gospel and in the book of Acts. Luke understands that Jesus’ death and resurrection is the only way that we can be saved from the power and penalty of sin (Luke 24:46-47).

If you are reading this book because you are not a follower of Jesus but you want to investigate what he taught and did, then allow me to put all of Luke’s cards on the table for you: he wants you to believe in Jesus so that you may be saved from your sins. He wants you to have the same kind of certainty that was available to Theophilus two thousand years ago. Luke has put together a reliable narrative of events that really happened, and so as you read, notice the way that Luke describes events and records details; see if they do not have the ring of eyewitness testimony. Also, let me suggest that you pay careful attention to what kind of person finds a home in the hope that Jesus offers, and what kind of person walks away from Jesus a bit confused about why he isn’t impressed with their goodness.

And if you are already a follower of Christ, let me encourage you to read along two lines. First, take notice of what Jesus accomplished through his **incarnation**, ministry, death, and resurrection. Luke uses the word “salvation” and “save” more than any of the other Gospel writers. As you read, look for what the salvation that Jesus brought really means (and what it does not mean). Second, read Luke’s Gospel with an eye toward learning more about Jesus’ character and priorities. There are obviously some aspects of Jesus’ life that we are not meant to emulate (for example, his death on a cross as sacrifice for his people’s sins). But both Jesus and his disciples taught that we should look to certain aspects of his character as

## Introduction

a model for our own behavior (see 1 John 2:6; 1 Corinthians 11:1): particularly his love (John 13:34), his humility (Philippians 2:3-8), and his sacrificial service to others (Mark 10:42-45). One of the very best ways for believers to grow in Christ-likeness is to spend time learning about and contemplating the story of Jesus as recorded in Luke's faithful narrative.

With those goals in mind, let's turn to that account itself, with the prayer that God would use it to fulfill Luke's intention that we have certainty concerning the things that we have been taught.

# 1. NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE

The first two chapters of Luke, often referred to as the “Infancy Narrative,” are particularly memorable for their angelic visitations and vivid accounts of otherwise insignificant people who are swept up in God’s great plan of **redemption**. The story begins in the days of Herod, who reigned in Israel under Roman authority from 37 BC to 4 BC. At this point in history, it had been hundreds of years since the Lord had sent a prophet to his people. But that was all about to change, beginning with an elderly Jewish couple that was living with the personal burden of childlessness (**1:5-7**), a socially and economically devastating problem in that society.

## **John’s Arrival**

The scene opens on a very unusual day in the life of Zechariah, the husband. A priest, he had been chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense (**v 8-10**), presumably on the altar that stood in the holy place. In those days, there were more priests than were needed to maintain the functions of the temple, and so many priests went their whole lives without being selected for service. This was literally a once-in-a-lifetime experience for Zechariah, but it turned out not to be the lead story that day, for this was the day that God was beginning to break his silence.

As the priest stood in the temple, a frightening messenger from the Lord appeared at the right side of the altar (**v 11-12**); we find out later that this angel’s name is Gabriel (**v 19**). Apparently, Zechariah had been

praying at the altar, for after calming him down, Gabriel tells him that his prayer has been heard (v 13). At first blush, it seems that Zechariah must have been praying for a child, because the angel indicates that the gift of a son named John is the specific answer to his prayer. But it is hard to imagine that an elderly man with a barren wife (v 7) would not have long since given up hope for a child, and Zechariah's **incredulity** at the thought of having a child (v 18) makes it seem that the possibility had not entered his mind in quite some time.

If not a child, then what was Zechariah praying for? It seems from Gabriel's description that he might well have been praying for the redemption of Israel. The angel tells Zechariah that John will bring joy and gladness to his childless parents (v 14), for reasons we can easily imagine. But he will also cause many to rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord and will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb (v 15). Gabriel describes John's future ministry as being one of turning the hearts of Israel to the Lord in the "spirit and power" of **Elijah**, going before the Lord and preparing the people for his arrival (v 16-17). By choosing language that clearly echoes the prophecies of **Malachi** (Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6), Gabriel is signaling that the time has come for God to fulfill the promises he had made to Israel some time before.

Zechariah's response is almost comical; a celestial visitor has just met him in the temple and told him that he will have a son who will fulfill an ancient prophecy about Elijah's coming to prepare the way for the Lord, and yet his first thought is about whether or not his elderly wife will be able to get pregnant (Luke 1:18)! If Zechariah was frightened at Gabriel's first appearance (v 12), then the rebuke and reminder of the angel's role and dignity that followed his skepticism (v 19) must have completely unnerved him. As a result of his failure to believe this message from the Lord, he is told that he will be silent until all of these events take place (v 19-23).

Now, Zechariah's punishment may strike us as unfair. After all, his question does have some merit: how exactly is Elizabeth going to get

pregnant? But Gabriel's response shows us that the priest's question wasn't motivated by mere curiosity. Instead, it revealed that he did not believe the angel's words, despite the fact that Gabriel stands in the presence of God and was sent to speak to him (v 19-20). God was answering Zechariah's prayers and blessing him beyond all reason, but he lacked the faith to see what was obvious to his wife (compare his reaction to Elizabeth's interpretation of events in **verse 25**). Zechariah was a **righteous** man however, and so the story has a happy ending. After the child was conceived (v 24) and born (v 57), Zechariah resisted pressure from family members and named the boy John (v 59-64) in obedience to the angel's command.

What is clear from this story is that the salvation that John will herald is coming at the initiative and kindness of God. Elizabeth's response in **verse 25** gets right to the **theological** heart of the matter: it is the Lord who has done this, showing favor and taking away her disgrace. The family and neighbors who witness John's birth all recognize it as a gift of God's mercy and share in Elizabeth's joy at what the Lord has done (v 58). As a result, the whole region is set atwitter, wondering with awe what exactly God is doing (v 65-66) as John appears publicly to Israel in the wilderness.

## Jesus' Birth Foretold

There are obvious parallels between the events leading up to the birth of John and those leading up to the birth of Jesus. To name a few, you have:

- the arrival of the angel Gabriel (v 19, 26-28).
- the news of a seemingly impossible pregnancy (v 13, 31).
- an initial response of fear (v 12, 29-30).
- a promise about the child's future and identity (v 17, 32-33, 35).

But even with those similarities, it is clear that Mary's child is going to be the greater of the two. Jesus is no mere forerunner for the

Lord, but he is the Son of God himself (v 35). He is the one who will receive the throne of the great **King David** (v 32), bringing God's never-ending rule to the people of Israel (v 33). For this reason, it is fitting that when Elizabeth and Mary met (v 39-45, 56), the prophet leapt in his mother's womb for joy and the elderly woman blessed her younger relative.

Perhaps the most striking part of Gabriel's announcement comes in response to Mary's question (v 34): how can a virgin have a child? The angel explains to her that she will conceive by the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High (v 35). I'm not sure that that really clarifies matters all that much; in fact, it seems to raise more questions than it answers. But something in the angel's bearing must have told Mary not to ask any more questions, because she let that issue drop there.

## The Songs of Praise

The best-known sections of Luke's first chapter are probably the two powerful expressions of praise that accompany the action. In **verses 46-55**, Mary reflects on her visit to Elizabeth in a poem that is often referred to as the Magnificat, after the first word of the poem in the Latin translation. In **verses 67-79**, Zechariah chimes in with a prophecy, referred to as the Benedictus for the same reason. The two songs share some common features:

- Both "singers" understand the birth of their son to be an expression of God's faithfulness to keep his ancient promises to **Abraham** and his descendants (v 54-55, 70-73; see Genesis 22:17-18). The Lord had declared that he would send a messenger who would precede his arrival (Malachi 3:1), and Zechariah understands that John is that messenger (Luke 1:76-79). This section is full of the echoes of Old Testament events.
- Each sees the coming of the **Messiah** as both a victory for the lowly and needy (v 48-50, 68-69), and a defeat for the enemies of God's people (v 51-54, 71, 74).

- Zechariah and Mary both express exuberant praise to God for what he is doing. Mary's soul "glorifies"—or "magnifies" (ESV)—the Lord (v 46) and her spirit rejoices in him (v 47). Usually when we speak of magnifying something, we are making something larger than it really is. But when Mary magnifies the Lord, she isn't making him bigger; she's increasing the love and joy and worship of her heart until it is more in line with how great God is! Zechariah likewise praises the Lord (v 68) and exalts his tender mercies (v 78).

That's all well and good, but we might well ask: why does Luke interrupt the flow of his story to give us these two poems? They are interesting, but they don't serve to advance the plot at all. Perhaps we can best understand their presence in the text as our author's way of giving us a clue as to how we should read his book. Think about it: here at the outset we have been introduced at length to two characters, Zechariah and Mary. Each comes to understand that God is moving to save his people, and both react with love and praise to the Lord. Might that be a pattern for us to follow as we read Luke's Gospel? We are going to read about things that are even more wonderful than what Mary and Zechariah knew at this point. If they were led to joyfully magnify the Lord, how much more should our hearts convert the fuel of Luke's narrative into flames of praise!

## Two "Impossible" Births

Looked at as a whole, Luke 1 tells the story of two impossible births. We are accustomed to stories of women giving birth; according to the best estimates, almost 400,000 babies are born every day. I personally know three families who were blessed with a new baby just this week; births are not particularly extraordinary. But there are two kinds of women who never, ever give birth: very old ladies and virgins. And so it makes sense that both Zechariah and Mary wrestle with the question, "How can this be?"

The answer comes there in **verse 37**, where Gabriel tells Mary that "no word from God will ever fail." Mary does not need to know the

mechanics of how it will happen; she only need be confident that the Lord has declared that it will happen. His word never fails. As some older translations render **verse 37**, nothing is impossible with God.

Now, roughly a century ago influential theologians began to doubt whether or not that was actually true. They pointed to the virgin birth of Jesus as a superstition that intelligent, modern people simply couldn't accept. After all, we all know that there is no such thing as a baby being born to a virgin. That's impossible! If Christianity was going to flourish in the **scientific era** (or so the thinking went), it would need to **jettison** these kinds of "myths" that were an insult to our reason and intelligence.

On the surface, that might sound reasonable. But if you look closely, you will see that it does not really do justice to Luke's narrative.

Mary and Elizabeth were not gullible bumpkins who didn't know how babies were made.

Mary and Zechariah and Elizabeth were not gullible bumpkins who didn't know how babies were made and believed fantastical stories (nor, for that matter, were Luke and his original readers). They found the whole idea just as unlikely as you and I might, but that's exactly the point! The great theological truth that Luke is bringing to the forefront by including these events in his "orderly account" is that God's salvation will come in a seemingly impos-

sible way. As Jesus will say later in Luke's Gospel, "What is impossible with man is possible with God" (18:27).

This is not the first time that the Lord has done something like this. Luke's narrative calls to mind a series of extraordinary births in the Old Testament where a promised deliverer is born to an otherwise barren woman (Isaac in Genesis 17 and 21, Samson in Judges 13, Samuel in 1 Samuel 1). The praise of Zechariah and Mary in our passage calls to mind the joyous song of **Hannah** in 1 Samuel 2. In those Old

Testament events, the Lord was establishing a pattern that is brought to fruition in the births of John and Jesus. The point is clear: salvation must come in a way that only God can accomplish so that we will know that God has done it and so that he might get all the glory.

The question that Luke's narrative poses to us as his readers is simply whether or not we will believe that God can do what he says he will do. We must believe that God has accomplished his salvation through the work of Christ. We also must live each day confident that God will keep all of the promises he has made to his people, no matter how far removed they might seem from our daily circumstances. Do we really believe that God will keep us and strengthen us in the darkest of valleys? Or do our feelings and our fears seem more truthful than the words of God? Zechariah's failure to embrace the Lord's promises stands as a warning to us; Mary's humble response (Luke **1:38**) serves as our example. "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her" (v **45**)!

## Questions for reflection

1. How do the songs of Mary and Zechariah help you to praise God for his work in human history and in your own life?
2. Why did God use Elizabeth and Mary to achieve his plans to fulfill his promises? How does this resonate in your life, as you consider your own weaknesses and disappointments?
3. When do you find it hardest to believe that God can do what he says he will do? Why do you find that hard? What would it look like to respond in a Mary-like way in those moments?

## PART TWO

### A Tale of Two Kings

The shadow of **Caesar Augustus** looms large at the beginning of chapter 2. Luke's inclusion of Augustus' name (**2:1**) is not necessary for him to communicate the details regarding when these events took place; his reference to **Quirinius** in **verse 2** actually pinpoints the timing more specifically. The mention of Augustus, however, would have conjured up all of the power and glory of the Roman empire and its authority. He was the most powerful man in the world, flattered by the Roman senate as the "son of a god" and hailed by the poet Virgil as the "son of the Deified, who will make a Golden Age again" (*The Aeneid*, translated A.S. Kline, VI.791-793). At Augustus' instruction, everyone traveled to their ancestral home in order to register (**v 3**).

Observe how these opening verses take us on a downward spiral of power and influence:

- Augustus (**v 1**), the embodiment of ruthless power and privilege
- Quirinius (**v 2**), a regional governor
- Joseph (**v 4**), a poor (but free) man
- Mary (**v 5**), an unmarried, pregnant woman
- The baby (**v 6-7**): it would be hard to imagine a less powerful, less privileged person on the planet at that moment than this infant sleeping in a feeding trough for livestock.

Everything in these opening verses points to how lowly the baby was. The irony is palpable for those who know where Luke's narrative is heading; the man recognized by the world as its king (Augustus) lived in a palace surrounded by opulence. This child's beginnings, however, could not have been more humble, but his **kingdom** would far outstrip the glories of Rome. Jesus (as the child is named in **verse 21**, according to the angelic instructions) truly was the Son of the Most High. He would reign on David's throne in an eternal kingdom that

puts Augustus' empire to shame (see 1:32-33). The lowly circumstances of Jesus' birth show us that God's kingdom will come in ways that surprise and subvert our expectations about what true greatness and power look like (see 22:25-27).

**Evangelicals** do not often reflect on the material poverty of Jesus (in comparison to some groups, like the **Franciscans**, who emphasize it). But the fact that the Son of God would enter the world in the most humble way imaginable and then live his life in poverty (8:3) is extremely significant. Consider the words of the apostle Paul, written to the church at Corinth: "For you know the **grace** of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Jesus became poor so that his people might become spiritually rich through his poverty and suffering.

Before his incarnation, the Son of God was rich beyond anything that Augustus could ever have imagined. But for our sake he stooped to be born not merely as a human (that alone would have been an incredible condescension!), but as a powerless infant in a barn outside an inn in an insignificant town. Because he did, all those who trust in Christ have the sure hope that they will be brought to heaven with Jesus when they die (Luke 23:42-43). Jesus became low in order that we might inherit great spiritual treasure. That is the ultimate point of Luke's **paradoxical** contrast between Caesar Augustus and the baby King Jesus.

## **Shepherds and Angels**

The study in unexpected methods continues when the angel of the Lord appears to the shepherds in the nearby fields (**2:8-9**). A modern publicist might recommend a press conference or a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*, but the Lord chose to send a messenger to a group of shepherds in the fields. The surprise is lost on those who are used to the role that these men play in the birth narrative, but these would have been among the least likely candidates to receive

such an announcement. Shepherds in that society were despised, distrusted and deprived of their civil rights. It is as if God were trying to make it crystal clear to what kind of people the good news of Jesus comes. It does not come to the rich and powerful—those who have no sense of their need. That’s not the way that God works. He does not reveal his ways to the Caesars of the world; he is the God who sends a messenger to shepherds.

The shepherds were terrified (**v 9**), as well you might be if your otherwise peaceful night was interrupted by the glory of God shining around you. The angel encouraged them not to be afraid (**v 10**—see 1:13, 30), and informed them of the joyous news of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. The shepherds could be forgiven if they had trouble reconciling the data: the one who was Savior, Messiah, and Lord (**2:11**) was also a baby lying in a manger (**v 12**). A trip to Bethlehem confirmed all that the Lord has spoken to them through his angel; and as people processed and pondered these events, the news began to spread about the shepherds’ story (**v 16-20**).

The events in Bethlehem were meant to inspire praise in those who become aware of them. They were, in the words of the angel, a cause of great joy for the people. The great company of the heavenly host modeled that joy for the shepherds with their declarations of praise (**v 13-14**), and the responses of the humans involved ranged from amazement (those who heard the shepherds’ story, **v 18**) to treasuring and pondering these things (Mary, **v 19**) to glorifying and praising God (the shepherds themselves, **v 20**). The surprising news of this section—namely, that God’s favor (in the words of the angels in **verse 14**) was resting on people like shepherds, barren women, and poor teenagers—was enough to kindle joy and wonder in those who heard of it. That may be because at the heart of gospel joy are the twin realizations that we are not the kind of people who deserve God’s love (in fact, it turns out that there aren’t any of that kind of people), but that in his great love God has sent his salvation to people just like us anyway. No wonder Christians have spent the past 2,000 years joining

the shepherds in “glorifying and praising God for all the things they [have] heard and seen”!

### **Simeon’s and Anna’s Stories**

The events recorded in **verses 21-38** (as well as much of the first chapters) may in fact be the testimony of Mary herself. We know from the book of Acts, which Luke also authored, that he probably spent extended time alone in Jerusalem while his traveling companion Paul was in prison (see Acts 21:17 – 24:27). It is not hard to imagine that Mary was herself part of the church family there. This would, of course, explain how Luke had access to the details of Mary’s inner life (see Luke **2:19, 33**, 51) and to the two events that took place in the temple shortly after Jesus’ birth.

The details of this account show us that Joseph and Mary were obedient, law-keeping Jews. Leviticus 12 prescribed certain rituals for Jews to complete after childbirth, including **circumcising** male infants on the eighth day (Luke **2:21**) and purification rites performed for the mother 33 days later in the temple (**v 22, 24**). In addition, Exodus 13 instructed Israelite parents to set apart their firstborn son to the Lord (Luke **2:23**). After naming the child Jesus in accordance with the angel’s instructions (**v 21**), the parents journeyed to Jerusalem in order to fulfill their obligations and sacrifice the pair of birds that were prescribed in the law for poor people.

While in the temple, the family met two extraordinary people. Simeon is described in **verse 25** as righteous and devout. Usually when Luke uses the word “righteous,” he is describing someone’s conduct toward other people. “Devout” usually has reference to being careful about religious duties. In addition to that, in **verse 25** we are told that the Holy Spirit was on him. The wording there indicates that the Spirit was on him continually and had communicated to Simeon that he would see the Lord’s Messiah before he died (**v 26**). When the Spirit brought Simeon into the temple courts, Simeon encountered the

family and understood the infant Jesus to be the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to him (v 27-28).

At that moment (v 38), a widow named Anna came up to the family. A very elderly prophetess, she lived in the temple, where she worshiped, prayed, and fasted constantly (v 36-37). In response to the family's presence in the temple, Anna gave thanks to God and began to speak about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Israel (v 38).

Both Simeon's and Anna's stories emphasize that the faithful people of Israel were engaged in a long process of waiting for God's act of salvation to come. According to **verse 25**, Simeon was waiting "for the consolation of Israel," a phrase that conjures up Isaiah's prophecies about the arrival of the Lord's comfort and compassion (Isaiah 40:1-2; 49:13). In a similar way, Anna testified to "all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38; see Isaiah 52:9). Most likely these crowds thought of the coming redemption in political terms—after all, Israel had been groaning under foreign oppression for centuries. The arrival of a deliverer who would throw off the shackles of Roman rule in Jerusalem and restore the glory of Israel (Luke 2:32) was certainly a cause for joy and excitement.

But instead of uniting the nation toward a glorious overthrow of Rome, Simeon told Mary that the child was destined actually to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel (v 34; see Isaiah 8:14). And as Luke's narrative progresses, we will see that Jesus' ministry effectively splits the nation in two. The Jewish religious establishment, for the most part, will see Jesus as someone to be spoken against (Luke 2:34), even as many others (including Gentiles, v 31-32) receive him as their deliverer.

In addition, something in Simeon's prophecy (v 34-35) gives us a clue that the deliverance this child will bring will not come about through political power and military conquest. He tells Mary enigmatically that the coming of this comforter-redeemer means that a sword will pierce her soul; whatever the specific meaning of that

phrase, it is clear that being the mother of this child will be a cause of suffering for Mary. And for the first time amid all of the joy in the beginning of Luke's Gospel, we see the cross looming in the distance. This child would indeed redeem Israel, but it would be through pain and cost.

The details of Jesus' salvation are still hazy in these earliest chapters. What is clear, however, is that Jesus is the one sent by God as the redeemer. That is the point that we must see emerging from all of these different stories in the first two chapters of Luke. Simeon had been promised that he would see the Messiah before his death; and when he held the child in his arms, he knew that the promise had been fulfilled (**v 28-29**). Don't miss the power of **verse 30**, where Simeon declares that his eyes have seen God's salvation. God's salvation is not a "what;" it is a "who." To see Jesus is to see God's salvation.

This means that our experience of salvation is not primarily seen in a change of our circumstances or a program of self-improvement, but in a relationship. God did not send us an impersonal force or a guide to better living; he sent us his Son. And so the Christian life is not primarily a code of conduct or a philosophy of life; it is a relationship with a living Person. Our relationship with Jesus displaces everything else to the **periphery** of our lives and becomes the central reality that controls each day. We know God's grace when we look on Jesus with the eyes of faith and say, "This is God's salvation."



Christianity is not primarily a code of conduct or philosophy of life; it is a relationship with a Person.

## Questions for reflection

1. Do you ever envy or fear those in your day who are like Caesar Augustus was in Jesus' day? How does Luke help reorient your perspective?
2. "I bring you good news that will cause great joy" (v 10). Is "joy" your own response to the gospel?
3. "Our relationship with Jesus displaces everything else to the periphery of our lives." How have you experienced this in your life? Are there ways in which it needs to become more true of you?