

March 13, 2022

GOD'S SAVING WORK BEGINS

Luke 1:1-25

(1 of 13 in a series through Luke 1-7)

There's a scene in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* where Narnia has been cursed so that it's constantly in the dead of winter. Everything is frozen, and life is hard. But then suddenly the snow below their feet begins to get a bit mushy. You can hear the sound of rivers once frozen still starting to trickle. The trees are starting to bud. Life is starting to show itself everywhere. And it's all happening because the king of Narnia, Aslan, is on his way. That's very much how the gospel of Luke begins.

Between the last words of the Old Testament and the first words of the New Testament, there is a four hundred year gap. During that time, the Lord hasn't been speaking through his prophets like you see faithfully happening in the Old Testament. The people of Israel aren't quite in the kind of bondage they once faced in Egypt, but they are under the tyranny of Roman rule. Many no doubt have given up on the hope of the Messiah coming, perhaps thinking that God has abandoned his promises and his people. And then, as the opening scene of Luke's gospel unfolds, our attention is directed to priest, in the line of Aaron, faithfully performing his duties at the temple. Perhaps it's no big deal. I mean, clearly there were some still looking for the Messiah. There were some righteous Israelites carrying on the work that the Lord had given them to do. His name was Zechariah and his wife's name was Elizabeth. Nothing special there. And then we read, "But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years" (v. 7). And all the sudden our ears perk up, don't they? We've heard this before. In fact, every time we've heard this kind of thing in the pages of the Old Testament, it signaled to us that the Lord was about to do something. His saving work for his people was about to show itself.

That's what Luke wants us to see. As he opens his gospel, he gives us all the hints that Lewis gave in that scene in Narnia with the snow starting to melt, the air starting to warm, and the flowers starting to bloom. Luke is telling us that God's saving activity is about to burst onto the scene. He's going to tell us about how our God sent his Son into the world and how Jesus lived, died, and rose for us so that we might have life in him.

But before he gets even to the birth of Christ, he takes us back to this earlier period with an older couple, with the wife barren, who—to their surprise—were about to have a son. And as he walks us through this story I believe that Luke wants us to see the nature of God's saving work for his people. Therefore, as we walk through these first twenty-five verses of Luke's gospel this morning, I want us to see some elements of God's saving work that I think Luke is showing us in his opening chapter of his gospel. And the first of these that I want us to recognize is that God's saving work occurs in history.

God's saving work occurs in history

As Luke opens his gospel, he gives a brief introduction, which is directed to an individual named “Theophilus.” It’s the same individual whom he addresses in the book of Acts as well, so my guess is that this is an individual who has been funding Luke’s research and writing. He’s most likely a believer and a believer of some wealth. And so as Luke opens his gospel account he spells out for Theophilus what he’s doing and why he’s doing it. He writes, “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (vv. 1-4).

Now, note how clearly Luke tells us that though this will be more, it is not less, than a historical project. He starts like others writing historical records by noting the work of those who have come before him. Then, he mentions that there have been eyewitnesses of the things he’s going to write about, that is, individuals who walked with the Lord Jesus Christ, saw his life up close, witnessed his death on the cross, and then saw him after he was raised and even touched his resurrected body. Moreover, we can add that many of these eyewitnesses were willing to give their lives—and did—for testifying to the truth that Jesus Christ had walked out of the tomb that Easter Sunday morning alive. Luke makes clear that what he’s about to write really took place in human history.

Then, right after his introduction, as he sets the scene for what is to unfold, as he dates the time in history in which these events took place. He writes in verse 5, “In the days of Herod, king of Judea.” This is a reference to “Herod the Great” who was recognized by the Romans as the “King of Judea,” and who reigned in the years from 37-4 BC. This would be like someone hundreds of years from now reading a writing from today which begins, “During the administration of President Joe Biden.” Nothing about that suggests that the writer is telling you a fictional story, does it? It tells you that what he’s writing actually occurred in history. And, again, that’s what Luke wants us to see.

Now, the reason this is so important to us is that Christianity is built upon real historical events that actually took place in history. The Christian faith isn’t some mythological story that someone made up to inspire us to live better lives or the sort. It isn’t like the story of Superman or some other comic book character that we all know isn’t real but serves to fuel our conversations and inspire us. The things that we speak about, sing about, and build our lives around as believers really took place in world history. Just as sure as there was a civil war in our country from 1861-1865 or George Washington was our first president or Lewis and Clark explored the western frontier of our country, so Jesus Christ—the God-man—was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, was crucified on a cross, and on the third day rose from the dead. These things happened. And if they didn’t happen, then we should all stop committing our lives to Jesus because our claim as Christians isn’t that Jesus just rose in our hearts so that we *feel* like he’s alive. Our claim—and the most important thing in history in our minds—is that Jesus of Nazareth physically walked out of the tomb on that Sunday morning. It really did happen.

That's why Luke is writing. He tells Theophilus that his purpose in writing these things is "that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (v. 4). Luke wanted Theophilus to know that God's saving work has occurred—and does occur—in history. Someone once asked Edith Schaeffer why he should become a Christian. And she responded, "Because it's true."¹ That's what Luke wants us to see in his opening words. God's saving work occurs in history. Second, God's saving work belongs to him alone.

God's saving work belongs to him alone

As Luke begins this story with which he opens his gospel, he directs us to a man named Zechariah. Zechariah belonged to one of the many divisions of priests from the line of Aaron. He was actually one of eighteen thousand priests.² And so the tasks of each priest were quite limited. In fact, each priest would only serve in the temple for one week two times a year. Moreover, because there were so many of them they would cast lots to see which priest would get to go into the temple and burn the incense. And on this particular day, Luke tells us, that Zechariah "was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn the incense" (v. 9). This was quite literally a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Now, the burning of the incense was symbolic of prayers rising to the Lord, and so fittingly, as Zechariah entered the temple, there were a group of Israelites waiting outside of the temple praying. And as Zechariah was in there, an angel appeared before him, and he was afraid, but the angel told him not to be afraid and then added, "Your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John" (v. 13).

The reason this is an amazing announcement, of course, is because we're told in verse 7 that Elizabeth was barren and both Zechariah and Elizabeth were advanced in years. Another reason this announcement is of utter importance is because their soon-to-be-born son, John, had an important role. He would be a prophet, preparing the people for the coming of the Christ. In fact, he would point to Jesus as the Christ at every stage of his life, and I mean *every* stage. The angel notes that just as the Spirit would come upon men in the Old Testament so that they might prophesy, John would be "filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (v. 15) and that's because he would bear witness to Jesus even from the womb. Later in this chapter we'll see that Elizabeth goes to see Mary, who is pregnant with Jesus, and John leaps up while still in the womb, bearing witness to the fact that he is in the presence of the Son of God.

But back to our story. Zechariah is obviously overwhelmed at everything going on, but that doesn't mean that he's really convinced. So he asks for proof. After all, it seems impossible. Luke tells us, "And Zechariah said to the angel, 'How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and

¹ Tom Schreiner relays this story in his Luke commentary. See *Luke*, ESV Expository Commentary, vol. 8 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 726.

² *Ibid.*, 728.

my wife is advanced in years?” (v. 18). So the angel answers Zechariah’s unbelief saying, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time” (vv. 19-20). And sure enough, in that instant, Zechariah was unable to speak.

Now, all of this was taking a long time, of course, and so the people who had been praying outside of the temple were growing anxious, wondering if something had happened to Zechariah. And of course something had—only not what they expected. So when Zechariah came out, he was unable to tell them what had happened but made signs to them so that they understood that he’d seen a vision, but they knew nothing more. And so he went home, and soon Elizabeth conceived but remained hidden for five months, rejoicing and saying, “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people” (v. 25). This is a reminder, of course, that not much had changed since the days of Job. Though we’re told Zechariah and Elizabeth were both righteous, still some thought they were being punished by Elizabeth’s barrenness because of sin, and so Elizabeth had borne reproach. But, now, no more.

But that raises a question for us, doesn’t it? Why had Zechariah and Elizabeth been unable to have a child? Why had Elizabeth been barren? And on that note, why is the Bible filled with so many barren women? It happens again and again, doesn’t it? We read of this note of a couple unable to have a child again and again in the Old Testament. We can think of Abraham and Sarah before the birth of Isaac (Gen 11:30; 18:11), or Isaac and Rebekah before the birth of Jacob and Esau (Gen 25:21), or Manoah and his wife before the birth of Samson (Judg 13:2), or Elkanah and Hanah before the birth of Samuel (1 Sam 1:2). Why? Why does God keep working this way?

It’s because he’s sending a message that his work of salvation belongs to him alone. No man gets credit for what God does to bring salvation to his people. Yes, of course he works *through* his unimpressive people. As Luke mentions Herod the Great in this text, it’s a bit ironic that the most important thing going on in the world in that moment had nothing to do with the king of Judea or any other world ruler. The most important thing in all the world in that moment was taking place with an unknown, unheralded, old couple, who were unable to have a child. And the reason God chose to work with them was to send the message to everyone that what they were about to see was nothing less than the work of God.

It is true that God’s saving work occurs in history. A priest named Zechariah and his barren wife Elizabeth really did have a son named John a little more than 2,000 years ago. But to say God’s work occurs in history doesn’t mean that it’s not supernatural and miraculous. And this is God’s point in using so many barren women. He’s sending the message loud and clear that something miraculous is happening here—something that can only be attributed to God.

And that’s what Luke wants us to see as he opens his gospel. God’s saving work is the work of God alone. No man orchestrated this plan for God’s people to be saved. No man is responsible

for pulling it off. No man even petitioned God to work in this way. God's work of salvation is all of God. No man gets to boast or receive any praise. So, first we see that God's work of salvation occurs in history. Second, it's the work of God alone. And finally, we see that God's saving work is a fulfillment of his promises.

God's saving work is a fulfillment of his promises

Luke also wants us to see in this narrative that what is taking place here is the fulfillment of promises that God had made years earlier. We see this with the angel's description of John. Gabriel had told Zechariah, "And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (vv. 14-17).

What's this about? Well, let's take some elements piece by piece. First, John is going to be a blessing to Zechariah and Elizabeth, but he's going to bring blessing to more than just this couple. The Lord has an intention to use John on a grand stage. Consequently, John is forbidden from drinking wine or strong drink—this signifies a special setting apart of John for the work of the Lord. And we'll see this later. Jesus will make the point to the unbelievers around him in Luke 7 that nothing pleases them, citing the differences between himself and John. He'll note, "For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'" (7:33-34). Thus, John will drink no wine as a symbol of his consecration to the Lord.

But then Gabriel begins to use some interesting notes about what John will be about in his ministry. He declares that he'll turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord and go in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children. What does he mean? Well, what Gabriel identifies is that the fathers in Israel had not been leading their children in obedience to the Lord, and so this has had a negative impact on them. John is coming to call them to repentance. But this particular task isn't mentioned here in Luke's gospel for the first time in the Bible. Rather, in the last book we have in our Old Testament, the Lord had said through the prophet Malachi, "Behold, I sent my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. . . . Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction" (Mal 3:1, 4:5-6).

What Gabriel is telling Zechariah is that his child to come—John the Baptist—would be this promised Elijah to come and prepare the people for the Lord's arrival. Elijah had been seen in the Old Testament as the representative of the prophets. And he hadn't even died. The Lord had simply taken him to heaven in a whirlwind of fire. And so the people were looking for this

promised “Elijah” to come who would prepare the people for the arrival of the Lord himself. Gabriel is telling Zechariah that God is going to fulfill this promise in John. He will carry out the work of his ministry in the spirit and power of Elijah. God was bringing about what he’d promised.

This is one reason it’s so important for us to read, teach, and preach the Old Testament. Apart from it, we will simply not understand what is going on in the New Testament. We see an example of that here with the promise of Elijah. But we will limit the importance of the Old Testament if we think it only prophesies with direct, verbal declarations that we label prophecies, such as when Micah 5:2 tells us that the Christ will be born in Bethlehem. More often than not the Old Testament actually prophesies by giving us repeated patterns and images that then return in the New Testament and escalate in the coming of Jesus. We see this for example in that barren women theme.

I’ve mentioned that the Lord uses barren women in order to send the message to everyone that this is his work alone. He will be the only one who can boast or receive glory for this work. And in the opening pages of Luke’s gospel, we see it again and barren Elizabeth will bear a son. But even Elizabeth points us forward because soon we’ll read not just of a barren woman having a son, which can feel impossible. We’ll read of the truly impossible happening as a virgin has a son named, Jesus, who will save his people from their sins.

And Luke wants us to see that this saving work of God that is bursting onto the scene in these opening verses is nothing less than the saving work of God occurring in history, by God’s power alone, and in fulfillment of God’s promises. And we wants us to see this so that like Theophilus, you and I might have certainty concerning these things. So let us this morning gather around the table and give thanks to God for that which he has really and truly and miraculously done in his Son for our salvation. Amen.