

The Gospel in Luke 1

Please turn to the last two verses of the Old Testament. This is the first sermon in a two-sermon series. The second one will be "The Gospel in Luke 2." (Sorry about dreary titles.) So our text will be in Luke 1, but first we'll look at how the OT ends.

I wanted to speak on the gospel from Luke 1-2, and by "gospel" I had in mind that God sent Jesus to save us from our sins, to bring us forgiveness and to make us his children, and to give us eternal life. You know, all the things we usually mean by "the gospel."

As I read through these two chapters, I got frustrated, because there was so little of what I was looking for. But as I read it over and over at the beginning of the week, getting frustrated, I noticed was that there *was* a lot of other good news.

Luke 1 and 2 are full of good news from God, but it is a bigger gospel than what we usually call "the gospel." So today we'll go through the speeches in Luke 1:1-55 (not quite all of Luke 1), and look for a bigger picture of "the gospel."

People speak and angels speak about good news. Jesus coming to earth brought all kinds of good news, *and it is all part of OUR gospel, OUR salvation*. We'll read to find out what OUR gospel, OUR salvation, has brought us and brought the world. First Malachi.

Malachi 4:5-6 - *"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."*

When the Jews put together their Scriptures, they ended their Bible with the words I just read. Malachi comes last in the OT exactly because of these two verses. The OT ends looking forward to something else, it ends waiting for the next part, the next Elijah.

Turn now to Luke 1. The O.T. ends, in a sense, expecting another part. By ending with Malachi, the Jews were saying to themselves and whoever read the OT that their story was not over. They were right. (The NT ends like that, too.)

Gabriel to Zechariah, Part 1 (Luke 1:11-17) - *Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their*

children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

What good news did Jesus' coming bring Zechariah? *Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth.*

It brought an answer to a prayer Zechariah had been praying a long time. It brought a son who would be a joy and a delight to him, and would bring joy to many people.

God does things like this for us, too. He doesn't announce it ahead of time, like he did for Zechariah, but if God had announced to me things that he has done, it would have been a wonderful announcement. What else does Gabriel say?

Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

These words at the beginning of Luke are an echo of Malachi 4:5-6. Luke's Gospel deliberately intends to come right after Malachi.

The good news is that God is sending a man who will turn Israelites back to God, and to turn people in broken families back toward each other, and to turn disobedient people back to wise living. Salvation starts with God turning people's hearts back to himself.

We think about forgiveness of sins, but the only people who want forgiveness are those who want God. God's kindness to us includes turning us to him in the first place.

Gabriel to Zechariah, Part 2 (Luke 1:18-20) - *Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." ¹⁹ The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."*

The good news needs to be believed. God's message can be doubted. Don't be gullible. Not every promise comes from God. But if it does, we need to respond with trust.

Elizabeth (Luke 1: 23-25) - *When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."*

In John 9, Jesus' disciples saw a man born blind, and asked Jesus, "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

The Jews assumed that if a person had trouble, there was sin. So Elizabeth was barren, no children, and they assumed she had offended God. Elizabeth's pregnancy took away her disgrace. Good things came in Zechariah's and Elizabeth's life, *and ours, too*.

Gabriel to Mary, Part 1 (Luke 1:29-33) - *But [Gabriel] said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."*

The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

There is a lot in these early speeches about God being faithful to the nation of Israel. Our salvation, the good news for Gentiles, starts with God keeping old promises to Israel.

Gabriel said things like this to Zechariah, too: *Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God.* Luke, who writes this book, is the only Gentile writer in the Bible. And Luke takes seriously that the gospel starts as Israel's story.

This is good news for Gentile believers, too, because if God keeps old promises to Israel, he'll keep old promises to us. If God just walks away from Israel, because he was not happy with them, what says he won't do that with us? No, God keeps all his promises. Gentiles weren't waiting for the Messiah. Israelites were.

Gabriel to Mary, Part 2 (Luke 1:34-38) - *"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For nothing is impossible with God." ³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me according to your word." Then the angel left her.*

Gabriel's first speech was about the child. His second speech is about conception: there is no man in Mary's life, so how exactly will she become pregnant?

The answer is, by a miracle from God himself. God is going to "father" this child in Mary, and that is one of the reasons why Jesus is called "the Son of God."

Elizabeth to Mary (Luke 1:39-45) - *At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears,*

the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

John is in Elizabeth's womb, and Jesus is in Mary's womb. We are told twice in this little section that when John, in Elizabeth's womb, realizes that Jesus, in Mary's womb, has come into the house, John in the womb jumps for joy! *That is what Jesus brings us.*

God is not telling us all that we should jump for joy. But he is telling us that if we could know, if we could see, what Jesus brings us, we also would certainly jump for joy.

God's favor toward people has been mentioned three times. Elizabeth said, "in these days God has shown his favor to me." Gabriel said to Mary, "you have found favor with God." And here Elizabeth again, "why am I so favored?"

In the next chapter, the angel choir will sing to the shepherds in the field, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to people, on whom his favor rests."

The favor of God, his special attention, starts with just a few, but the whole point of Jesus' coming is to spread this all over. And whoever has heard the story of Jesus and has been turned toward God by it has received that same favor.

Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" This is to all of us. Blessed is whoever believes that the Lord will keep his promises.

Mary, Part 1 (Luke 1:46-50) - *And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.*

Mary's speech, like many of the speeches in Luke 1 and 2, comes in two parts, and the first part thanks God for what he did for her, personally. She was a nobody, and God made her a somebody. "The Mighty One has done great things for me."

Everyone, and this means *everyone*, whom God has turned to himself, everyone whose heart has been opened to receive the good news (as it says of Lydia in Acts 16), can say the same thing as Mary: the Mighty One has done great things for **ME**.

The Scriptures are not really interested in parading any human, except Jesus. Every other human in the Bible is there to show us how GOD works, what God is like. These words are to show what God does for *all* the nobodies who trust him and follow him.

Your day is coming, too. God will exalt all the humble. Blessed are all those who believe that the Lord will keep his promises to them.

Mary, Part 2 (Luke 1:51-55) - *He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."*

Mary has opinions about what we call social justice. The coming of Jesus means that social just is on the way, and Mary's pleased about that.

The coming of Jesus means that God will scatter the proud, God will bring rulers down from their thrones, and God will lift up the humble. God will fill the hungry and send the rich away empty.

This is not the end of God's dealing with the proud, the rulers, and the rich. Just as soon as they lose their ridiculous belief that they are better than others and deserve to have more, just as soon as they humble themselves before God, than he will favor them, too.

But as it stands, the proud and the rulers and the rich bring a huge amount of distress and trouble on other people. For Mary, knowing that the child in her is the promised Messiah, the Son of God, means that God has begun in a new way to go after the proud and the rulers and the rich.

And God has begun in a new way to lift up the humble and to feed the hungry. In the book of Acts, this happens by the kind respect that all believers have for all other believers, and by the sharing of money and possessions within the church.

Mary ends with God's kindness to the Jews, and notice again the emphasis on God keeping his old promises: *He has helped his servant Israel, **remembering** to be merciful ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, **just as he promised our ancestors."***

Mary was speaking about 2,000 years after Abraham, just we are meeting about 2,000 years after Mary. 2,000 years is not nearly long enough for God to forget. We are in this story.

Now, let's summarize. What can we learn about the gospel from the speeches we've read today? What kind of good news is the good news that Jesus' birth brings?

One, it is personal. Zechariah got prayers answered, and a son that would be a joy and a delight. Elizabeth was favored by God and her disgrace was taken away. Little John in the womb leaped for joy. Mary rejoiced, and praised God, and said, "the Mighty One has done great things for *me*." John would turn parents and children back toward each other.

The good news did *not* take away all their troubles. That did not happen for any of them, not by a long shot. But it *did* bring good things into each of their lives, it changed their lives for the better, and it does that for each of us, too. It is personal.

This Scripture is telling us what kind of story the births of John and Jesus begin. We have been brought by God into this story. This is the flavor of the good news. It does bring good things into our lives, which we surely tend to lose sight of.

Two, it is national. John the Baptist will bring many in *Israel* back to the Lord their God. And God will give Mary's son Jesus the throne of his father David, and Mary's son Jesus will reign over the house of Jacob forever.

Next week I hope to continue this in Luke 2, and we'll read there what Simeon says. Simeon understands that Jesus will bring good news to Gentiles as well. But in Luke 1 it is all Israel, all the house of Jacob.

Jesus was God's way of keeping his old promises to Israel. This sometimes makes Gentiles edgy, but it shouldn't. If God was faithful to them, he'll be faithful to us, if God is gracious and patient with them, he will be with us, too.

Three, it is social. The good news that Jesus brings to earth is that God has begun in a new way to go after the proud, the rulers, and the rich. Such people mess up life on earth, and the birth of Jesus signals that God intends to make this right.

This is not a call for God's people to go after the world's rulers. God didn't need help sending Jesus, and he doesn't need help going after the world's injustice.

On the other hand, God's people, the followers of Jesus, need to understand that the proud and the rulers and the rich are a problem to God, a problem he goes after, so there needs to be none of it within God's people.

But this speech of Mary is not a call to God's people. It is good news, and that's how Mary says it. She is absolutely delighted that God has begun in a special way to throw down all the bullies of the world, and to help all those who were misused.

Four, it is spiritual. By "spiritual" I mean people's relationship with God. Old Zechariah and old Elizabeth and young Mary are all ordinary people who were trusting God and faithful to God. Luke 1 shows that God rewards such people.

And Gabriel told Zechariah that his son John the Baptist would bring many Israelites back to God, and his preaching would turn the hearts of fathers to their children (that's an interesting line) and would turn the disobedient back to God's ways. John was going to get people ready to meet God.

The good news is not only that God rewards people that are faithful to him. It is also that God is now going after sinners to turn them into faithful people, because God wants people prepared to meet him. Personal, national, social, spiritual.

The Christmas story is a bigger story than we thought. And it is *our* story. God has brought each of us into *this* story. It has been announced to *you*, just as to them.