



The Boy Who Is
LORD

A BRIEF AND SIMPLE LOOK AT THE BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD OF JESUS

BY
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The Boy Who Is Lord: Jesus' Birth in Luke's Gospel

By Pastor Mark Driscoll

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Introduction

The first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke provide unprecedented insight to the events surrounding the birth and childhood of Jesus Christ. This brief devotional guide follows Luke 1-2 to help individuals, families, and small groups study this section of Scripture. In each of the following chapters you'll find four sections:

1. Reading - The Bible verses in Luke that correspond with that particular chapter.
2. Learning - A summary and explanation of the passage.
3. Doing - Practical ways that the passage applies to daily life.
4. Praying - Prompts for further reflection and discussion.

This Bible resource is adapted from a sermon series preached through the entire book of Luke by Pastor Mark Driscoll.

Chapter 1: The Truth About Jesus

READING

Luke 1:1-4

Dedication to Theophilus

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.

LEARNING

There is a seemingly insatiable appetite for books, movies, and television shows where someone with a keen mind is on the hunt to find the truth about an important event. This explains our fascination with detectives, forensic scientists, historians, archaeologists, and crime scene investigators.

Their equivalent in the Bible is Dr. Luke who is the Indiana Jones of the New Testament. He penned the two lengthy historical books, Luke and Acts, which function as a prequel and sequel of sorts. In them, he is on the hunt to track down the facts about Christ and Christianity.

Investigating the man who was God

In the opening lines of Luke's gospel we are told that Luke is aware of other biographies about Jesus Christ, which likely includes Matthew and Mark as they were probably written before Luke. Even so, he was compelled as a historian to have personally "investigated everything carefully" (NASB) so that there would be "an orderly account" (1:1-4). According to Bible scholar J.C. Ryle, every Christian should feel indebted to the Gospel of Luke because several wonderful passages of Scripture are only found in Luke's Gospel:

The Gospel of Luke, which we now begin, contains many precious things which are not recorded in the other three Gospels. Such, for instance, are the histories of Zachariah and Elizabeth, the angel's announcement to the Virgin Mary—and, to speak generally, the whole contents of the first two chapters. Such, again, are the narratives of the conversion of Zacchaeus and of the penitent

thief-the walk to Emmaus, and the famous parables of the Pharisee and Tax-collector, the rich man and Lazarus, and the Prodigal Son. These are portions of Scripture for which every well-instructed Christian feels peculiarly thankful. And for these we are indebted to the Gospel of Luke.[\[1\]](#)

How did Luke undertake his epic investigation? He hit the road. We have no idea how many miles he traveled or how many months or years he investigated. But we can presume he interviewed the people Jesus met and went to places Jesus went. Luke probably sat down with Jesus' mother Mary, Jesus' brothers and sisters, people who knew Jesus as a child, any of Jesus' disciples who were living, Jesus' personal friends, and those who were among the crowds that were eyewitnesses to his preaching, miracles, deliverances, and resurrection, along with individuals Jesus ministered to and healed.

Who was Theophilus?

Luke's massive investigation was motivated by his concern for a man named Theophilus and others like him. This friend was possibly not yet a Christian, but wanted to know the truth about Jesus. So, after doing thorough research, Luke wrote the facts about Christ (the Gospel of Luke) and early Christianity (the book of Acts) for his friend so "that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:4). This makes Luke the most prolific New Testament writer. Altogether, his writing accounts for more of the New Testament than any other author, including Paul and John. Luke is also the longest book in the New Testament, with 1,151 verses (586 are Jesus' very words) whereas Matthew has 1,071 verses, Mark has 678, and John has 869.

The expenses for Luke's travels had to have been immense. Any researcher can attest to the costs involved with a lengthy project that includes travel, housing, and possibly support staff for weeks or months or more, possibly years. How did Luke pay for all of these costs? Theophilus was the man who underwrote Luke's investigation and thereby paid for his travel, salary, and expenses. He is mentioned at the beginning of both Luke and Acts, which was commonly done in that day to honor those who funded a project, much like the name of a generous donor often appears on a placard in a building in our day. Theophilus' title "most excellent," was used of nobility and likely indicates that he was a successful business and/or political leader. This title is also used for governors in Acts (for example, Felix and Festus in 23:26; 24:2; 26:25).

The name Theophilus means "lover of God," an appropriate title because the book of Luke is for anyone who loves God. Ambrose, the fourth-century church father, says it this way: "So the Gospel was written to Theophilus, that is, to him whom God loves. If you love God, it was written to you."

[2] Luke is for all who love God, and it goes out in an effort to encourage others to be lovers of God.

The beloved physician

Luke is mentioned three times in the New Testament, each time by his close friend Paul. In Colossians 4:14, Paul writes, “Luke the beloved physician greets you.” Scholars have noted the amount of medical language used in Luke-Acts as an indicator that Dr. Luke was the author.[3] Paul refers to Luke in Philemon 24 as his “fellow worker.” Luke spent lots of time traveling and laboring side-by-side with Paul in the work of the gospel. While many of Paul’s companions deserted him as he neared the end of his life, it appears Luke remained steadfast. Paul writes to Timothy in his last known epistle, “Luke alone is with me” (2 Timothy 4:11). In light of his medical background, Luke may have also been Paul’s physician tending to his various ailments and injuries in their travels together.

Paul does not include Luke in the group referenced in Colossians 4:11: “These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.” Therefore, most commentators have concluded that Luke was probably a Gentile and not a Jew.

Throughout the book of Acts which is also written by Luke, there are numerous “we” passages indicating that someone was traveling with Paul on his various missionary journeys (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16). Many Bible scholars have concluded that Luke was the traveling companion of Paul mentioned in the “we” passages, which meant he had firsthand knowledge of and access to people who were at the center of Jesus’ life and movement of early Christianity. This would have provided Luke incredible opportunities to conduct his historical research.

We do not know a lot about Luke’s personal life, but an early historical account outside of Scripture says, “Indeed Luke was an Antiochene Syrian, a doctor by profession, a disciple of the apostles: later however he followed Paul until his martyrdom, serving the Lord blamelessly. He never had a wife, he never fathered children, and died at the age of eighty-four, full of the Holy Spirit, in Boetia [Greece].”[4]

Luke’s name (Lucas) is a Greek word, indicating his non-Jewish Gentile background. Scholars have pointed out that his written language and style are distinctively Greek, displaying a high level of sophistication similar to classic Greek writers. This is due to the fact that Luke is well educated as a medical doctor. Bible commentator I. Howard Marshall writes:

The literary style of Luke and Acts demonstrates that their author was a well-educated person with considerable gifts of expression. The traces of medical language and the interest in medical matters displayed in them are consistent with authorship by the “beloved physician.” Luke’s gifts

as a historian have been recognized by many scholars who have viewed his work against its classical background and compared him favorably with the best of ancient historians.[\[5\]](#)

It is clear from the opening of Luke's gospel (1:1-4) that he was not personally an eyewitness to the ministry of Jesus. Rather, he personally investigated the life and ministry of Jesus Christ by interviewing those who were eyewitnesses. He writes that "the things that have been accomplished among us" were delivered or handed down to us from "those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" (1:1-2).

"An historian of the first rank"

Archaeologists and historians who have studied Luke's works have only confirmed the accuracy of his methodical research. For example, Sir William Ramsay, former Professor of Classical Art at Oxford University, was at one time very opposed to Luke being considered an accurate historian. But after undertaking his archaeological research in Asia Minor, Professor Ramsay was convinced that he was wrong and Luke was right on the points where they had disagreed. Recanting his previous statements that Luke got some things wrong, Ramsay said:

Luke is an historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy; he is possessed of the true historical sense; he fixes his mind on the idea and plan that rules in the evolution of history, and proportions the scale of his treatment of the importance of each incident. He seizes the important and critical events and shows their true nature at greater length, while he touches lightly or omits entirely much that was valueless for his purpose. In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.[\[6\]](#)

Luke's goal was to follow the truth wherever it led, and it led to Jesus Christ. In studying Luke, we should aim to likewise follow the truth wherever it leads.

DOING

Be comforted by God's love

It is stunning and wonderful to think that the longest book of the New Testament was written to one person, Theophilus. Does God love the world? Yes. Does God love all the nations? Yes. Does God love all the cities? Yes. Does he love individuals? Yes, he does. What a great comfort that he would go to such great lengths to actually have one book of the Bible given to one person. This indicates that God is very loving and he knows us all and doesn't deal with us as a herd but individually. The same God who loves the whole world also knows and loves you. You are loved by God.

Count the cost

Theophilus was possibly a new convert to Christianity. Perhaps he is wondering if everything he's heard about Jesus is really true—walking on water, casting out demons, multiplying fishes and loaves, healing the sick, resurrection from the dead. Did Jesus really say he was God? Can he really forgive sin? Is he really God become a man to reconcile us back to God?

The affluent, prominent, “most excellent Theophilus” has a lot to lose by publicly declaring himself to be a Christian. In that day, Caesar was lord. And as a Christian, Theophilus would pledge higher allegiance to Jesus the Lord. This could result in personal and financial ruin. He is likely a man wrestling with the implications of true faith, perhaps as you are: “Do I really believe in Jesus? Do I love Jesus? Do I belong to Jesus? Am I willing to go public and tell the world I am a Christian? Am I willing to give generously to the cause of Jesus?”

Give generously

Since Theophilus has a lot at stake, he hired Luke, a fellow Gentile—not a Jew who was looking for the Messiah, predisposed to some biased conclusion, but an educated and articulate man who has access to the apostles and other eyewitnesses. Theophilus commissions Luke to go find the truth and provide a full report. This would have been a very expensive project; Theophilus funded two books of the Bible. Two thousand years later, had it not been for Theophilus' generosity, we would be lacking the largest contribution to the entire New Testament.

It's very simple. Theophilus was a man who gave generously thereby enabling Luke to do his ministry. Rich people can love Jesus, and they're supposed to give generously, and poor people can love Jesus, and they're supposed to give generously. It's not about how much you make; it's about what you do with it. Theophilus decided to pay for Luke's ministry. And we got two books of the Bible out of it.

And I can assure you of this: Theophilus today, standing before the Lord Jesus, doesn't regret helping get the news of Jesus out to the world. What else are you planning on doing with your money? What else are you going to do with your intellect? I love that Luke gave his intellect and time and energy and Theophilus gave his money, and together, to this very day, we are still served by both of these exemplary men.

Respond to truth

Luke set out to find the facts. This is important because Christianity is not a philosophical system, but a historical reality. Christianity is about one man - Jesus Christ, and one event - his resurrection from death. We can dismiss opinions, conjecture, and hearsay, but facts point to truth that cannot be denied.

And if you follow the truth wherever it leads, you end up at Jesus.

Luke conducts his research during a historically significant moment when a window of opportunity is closing, about thirty years after Jesus returned to heaven. The eyewitnesses are dying, and if someone doesn't capture the information soon, like a morning dew it vanishes forever.

As an aside, it's incredulous how Christianity is so often cast aside as a religion for the naïve. Luke was intelligent and highly educated, conducting painstaking research for Theophilus who was also almost certainly intelligent and highly educated. No one can honestly dismiss Jesus without doing some homework, like Luke did. And his book is a great place to begin investigating the boy who is Lord.

PRAYING

- What are the ways God has shown his love to you personally?
- Where are you afraid to go public with your faith? Who do you know you need to talk to about Jesus but have been delaying?
- How can you best use your talents (like Luke) and your money (like Theophilus) to honor Jesus and help others meet him?
- Do you know what the Bible says about Jesus? Do you believe it to be true? Why or why not?

Chapter 2: The Silence Breaks

READING

Luke 1:5-25

Birth of John the Baptist Foretold

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 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."

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "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." And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying,

“Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”

LEARNING

Investors, news reporters, sports bettors, political pollsters, weather forecasters, marketing gurus, and nearly everyone else wishes they could predict the future. Yet, no matter how hard we try we never really know what tomorrow holds.

What things in the future are you trying to predict and prepare for?

You cannot know the future, but you can know the God who does. The one true God knows tomorrow and every day after that. The same God who knows the future also rules over the future and when he reveals it to us it is called prophecy. This makes the Bible unlike any other religious text because it alone is the book that God wrote revealing the future that only God knows.

All of human history is ultimately about Jesus. And the story of Jesus’ life on earth begins with a prophecy.

400 years of silence

The final book of the Old Testament was written roughly 400 years before Jesus’ birth by a prophet named Malachi. Through this man, the Holy Spirit says, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare 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” (Malachi 3:1).

Malachi 4:5-6 provides more details about this messenger John the Baptizer: “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 fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

God makes the incredible promise to enter human history, following a messenger who has a preaching ministry like Elijah’s who will herald the Lord’s arrival much like a parade that gets everyone fired up for the honored guest at its end. He will come to the temple, and one of the effects of his ministry will be to bring sinners to repentance. Following this prophecy, there are 400 years of divine silence as the Old Testament concludes and awaits the fulfillment of this prophecy. No book of the Bible is written, and no prophet speaks. Some begin to wonder if God’s provision has left God’s people. With

exceptions, each generation becomes a little more stiff necked, hard hearted, and cold. Many people aren't walking with God as they ought.

But a remnant remains devoted to the Lord, including a man named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. Luke tells us, "they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord" (1:6). It is their son John who will fulfill Malachi's prophecy and prepare the way for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

God loves seeming nobodies from nowhere

Flash forward from the time of Malachi to the days of Herod the Great. History reports that he was a brilliant but evil ruler, best known for reconstructing the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The temple was a landmark of monumental significance for the people of God and the setting scene for Luke's narrative.

We meet two very ordinary people named Zechariah and Elizabeth. Elizabeth is from the priestly line of Aaron, so she comes from generations of ministers. Zechariah is a priest, the equivalent in those days of a rural pastor.

What else do we know about this couple? One, they're old, which in that day meant anything beyond age 50. Two, they are barren—they can't have any children, and they depended on their children to look after them in their old age. Three, they are grieved. In their day, to be old and childless was not only emotionally devastating, but also financially dangerous. Without hospice care or government aid, they depended on their children to look after them in their old age. Four, Zechariah and Elizabeth are also poor. Zechariah is a simple priest out in the middle of nowhere — according to the world's wrong view, he was a nobody who lived nowhere with nothing. Furthermore, many people who were childless wondered if God had cursed them with barrenness rather than blessing them with a baby. As a great example to us, this old couple was simple and sad but still steadfast.

There were reportedly 18,000 priests assigned to one of 24 divisions, with 750 men in each division. Each division would travel to Jerusalem for one week, two times a year, to minister at the temple. All 750 priests would convene and then roll dice to see who got to do the big job: enter the temple, throw some incense on the coals, and say a prayer. That was it. Once you got to do it, you were done for life. They declared you holy and blessed, and you never got to do it again.

Proverbs says, "We may throw the dice, but the Lord determines how they fall" (Proverbs 16:33, NLT). For years—even decades—Zechariah would travel all the way to Jerusalem but was never chosen because the dice never fell in his favor. But the meaning of their names gives us a hint that

God is up to something. Elizabeth means “God’s oath,” and Zechariah is “the Lord remembers.” Sure enough, Zechariah’s big day finally arrived, and it is much bigger than he could have ever imagined.

A really, really big day

The old priest enters the temple, carrying his incense. Alone. In the next moment, God breaks his 400 years of silence when the angel Gabriel—a messenger from the LORD—appears to Zechariah right there in the temple. “Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him,” the Bible tells us, which means we’re lucky the old guy didn’t die of a heart attack (Luke 1:12). The angel delivers the good news: Zechariah and Elizabeth are going to have a baby boy. His name is to be John (“God is gracious”), and he will have a special calling on his life: “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 the power of Elijah . . . To make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Luke 1:16-17).

This is an amazing day. Not only is Zechariah going to have a son, he is going to have a son who will fulfill Malachi’s prophecy, one of the most significant prophecies in the history of the world. He will lead the prophetic welcoming committee for God’s entrance into human history as the boy who is Lord. Zechariah’s response? “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years” (Luke 1:18).

Let’s review. This is mind-boggling, history altering, and soul encouraging. Zechariah has been praying for a child for decades. The presence of God is right there in the temple, a few yards away. An angel is speaking to him. What else does he need?

Angels are worshippers of God who are ministers and messengers on his behalf. There are only two angels named in the Bible: Gabriel and Michael. Their credentials are unparalleled—“I stand in the presence of God,” Gabriel tells Zechariah (Luke 1:19). And yet the old man doubts the news, which means he gets to learn a lesson. Gabriel basically tells him to go home, be patient, and keep quiet. Zechariah has just had this incredible experience and he won’t be able to tell anyone about it because God renders him mute until John’s birth. Not long after Zechariah’s service at the temple, Elizabeth conceived and enjoyed a few months of worship, reflection, and preparation (with a silent husband as a consequence for him and perhaps a nice break for her) as she praised the Lord for his incredible, unexpected gift.

DOING

Know that God has a purpose—for history and for your part in it

God is a sovereign God. He rules over all times, nations, languages, cultures, races, classes, and

genders of people. He is working out everything in history according to his plan. Malachi's prophecy promised that "the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (3:1). The temple was destroyed in AD 70, which means our Jewish friends who are waiting for a Messiah have missed him. There is no temple because we don't need it anymore. We have Jesus, and he has fulfilled all of the temple's ministries. He is the presence of God that the temple prefigured, the Priest who stands between sinners and God, and the sacrifice given in the place of sinners. To explain this in greater detail the entire book of Hebrews was written.

In the New Testament we learn that God "made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place" (Acts 17:26). Like Elizabeth and Zechariah, you are alive right now at this particular moment because God has something specific for you to accomplish as part of his infinite wisdom and plan. We can start by faithfully worshipping and patiently trusting him as Zechariah and Elizabeth did, while never giving up praying for the desires of our heart.

Sometimes we just need to keep quiet, trust God, and wait

Sometimes there's nothing for us to say until God has done his thing and we need to just wait quietly. Like Zechariah, many of us just need to keep quiet and wait. I, for one, am guilty of many times feeding my anxiety when I don't know what's going to happen. Oftentimes I talk too much and wait too little. Sound familiar? How many of us are like Zechariah? God says something and we say, "How do I know?" *All your sins are forgiven, past, present, and future.* "How can I be sure?" *God's love is unconditional.* "Really?" *Jesus is coming back.* "Are you sure?" We are all like Zechariah at times, and from his example we see God's loving patience with us.

Keep praying

The angel tells Zechariah, "Your prayer has been heard" (Luke 1:13). For decades, Zechariah and Elizabeth have been asking God for a child. What have you stopped praying about? God always answers prayer with one of three responses: yes, no, and later. Perhaps some people believed that God was ignoring Zechariah, but the man kept praying, loving, serving, worshipping God, and adoring his wife. God hadn't answered "yes" just yet. God hadn't answered "no" yet either. God kept answering "later," until finally the day arrived when the answer was "yes." We learn from their example that we should keep praying even when it seems like it's not working.

Give your sin and shame to Jesus

Elizabeth's words of praise close out this first scene: "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people" (Luke 1:25). This is a beautiful

summary of the doctrine of expiation, one of the most precious doctrines for Christians. We all have things in our lives that we feel dirtied, disgraced, defiled, and discouraged by.

The word “reproach” refers to the public shame or disgrace and even reviling that Elizabeth tragically endured because of her barrenness. Practically, this meant she suffered emotional, verbal, and spiritual abuse for decades as the other religious, smug, ungracious women would have considered her cursed by God because she was childless. Had Elizabeth sinned? No. Had she done anything wrong? No. She wasn’t perfect, but we are told that she loved and served the Lord and was by all accounts a very godly person. Was God cursing her? No. He was just working out his providential plan in his preferred time. His answer to her prayers was “later,” and later finally came.

Like Elizabeth, victims who have been sexually, emotionally, mentally, physically, or verbally abused can come to God, who takes away our reproach, shame, and disgrace. He takes all of that from us and places it on himself. When Jesus went to the cross he endured the cross, scorning its shame for us (Heb. 12:2). Dear friend, Jesus wants to lift from you today all of your shame and cleanse you completely. He wants to take away your reproach so that you can worship, celebrate, and enjoy him like Elizabeth, knowing of God’s love. He wants to lift that burden so that you can lift your voice to worship him with gladness in freedom.

PRAYING

- In what ways are you prone to question God? What does the Bible say in response to these particular areas of unbelief? Memorize these passages to guard your heart with truth when you are tempted to believe lies.
- Where have you grown weary in prayer? Can you think of examples from your own life when God granted a request after years of answering “later”?
- Do you know that God loves you? If you have sinned, give your sin to Jesus. If you have been sinned against, give your shame to Jesus. Worship with joy as Elizabeth did, because God is good.

Chapter 3: The Girl Who Raised God

READING

Luke 1:26-38

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

LEARNING

As the mother of God, Mary is the most significant woman in the history of the world. Mary's story begins with the Mother of us all, Eve the first woman in the history of the world.

At the dawn of creation, God made Adam and Eve in his image and likeness and gave them great freedom to enjoy their life. Sadly, our first parents succumbed to Satan and disobeyed the one restriction God placed on their life, by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The consequence of this sinful separation from God was death. And God would have been perfectly just to end the story of the Bible right there. But God instead speaks to our first parents revealing a

gracious rescue plan to turn his lost enemies into his loving family.

The first gospel sermon

In Genesis 3:15, God preaches against Satan and offers the first hope of salvation: “I will put enmity between you [Satan] and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

God’s answer to human sin, rebellion, and folly is a Son who will come through the daughter of Eve. There will be a battle between this Son and Satan, and although the Savior Son will be wounded, the Deceiving Dragon will be defeated. That was the promise. Ever since that terrible day when sin entered the world, God’s people eagerly anticipated the birth of the chosen Son, the one who would conquer Satan, sin, death, hell, and the wrath of God to be our Savior, be our forgiver, be our deliverer.

Throughout history, God reminded his people of this great promise, providing additional details along the way. Regarding when, Malachi said the Messiah would come to the Temple before it was destroyed in 70 A.D. (Malachi 3:1). Regarding where, Micah said he would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Regarding how, Isaiah said, “the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). And from Luke we learn that the virgin’s name was Mary.

The girl from Nazareth

Based on how Luke tells her story and describes his research, it is likely that he actually sat down with Mary, an older woman by that time, to ask her questions about her miraculous life. She is a relative of Elizabeth, but when Luke picks up the narrative Mary does not yet know that her elderly cousin is pregnant. Mary is simply a young woman, living a quiet life in a rural village called Nazareth.

Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament. It’s not mentioned in other significant historical texts because historically it was an insignificant town. Nathanael summed up the reputation of this town when asking in John 1:46, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” I have been to Nazareth and according to the archaeologists and historians who led our tour, it was home to somewhere between a few dozen to a few hundred people. It seems to have had only one well, which means it could not sustain a large population base. Mary and Jesus would have drawn water from that well while chatting with relatives and neighbors, as everyone in that small town would have known one another and depended upon one another.

Have you ever been on a long road trip and stopped in the middle of nowhere to get gas, grab a snack,

use the bathroom, clean the bugs off your windshield, and get out as fast as you can, thankful you don't have to live there? That's Nazareth.

After his visit with Zechariah within the sacred walls of the Temple in Jerusalem, where does God send the angel Gabriel to next? Nazareth. To meet with a girl nobody had ever heard of.

Mary was very young at the time—as young as age 12—but she was betrothed to be married to a man named Joseph. A lot has been said about this couple, especially every year at Christmastime. There is so much lacquer on the story that it's hardly recognizable, so we have to sand it down a bit to get to the truth.

Joseph was also probably fairly young and poor, working as a carpenter in Nazareth. Joseph and Mary likely grew up together, their families would have known each other, and maybe Joseph had a little crush on her since they were little kids. He's working hard, trying to save up enough money to marry the girl of his dreams. Think poor teens in a small rural town and you are probably close to reality.

That girl, Mary, was possibly illiterate, since very few rural young women were formally educated in that day. Her connection to God included singing, praying, and remembering the Scripture she had heard in synagogue. Unlike the matronly depictions common in medieval artwork portraying Mary as a pampered princess, she was actually a peasant girl with a simple well-worn dress and dirty hands and feet from manual chores.

Almost all of the theologians I've read believe Mary was somewhere between 12 and 14 years old. Let that sink in. How many parents don't trust their teenagers with a phone—let alone raising the Lord of the universe? Even with a seatbelt and an airbag, we still don't feel 13-year-olds are capable of handling a car. But God is likely born to a junior high-aged girl.

The fact that the couple was “betrothed” meant that Joseph and Mary had pledged to marry each other, an arrangement far more serious and binding than what we understand as engagement today. Terminating a betrothal required divorce proceedings, though a betrothed couple would not live together or consummate until after marriage. Together with their families, Joseph and Mary would have been anticipating a humble, joyful wedding ceremony.

Favored by God

Gabriel appears to this young girl, and it says that she was startled. Gabriel likely appeared as a man, and men would not have customarily approached and engaged in private with a young woman like

that. Additionally, he says that she has found “favor with God.” Gabriel shows up and gives this great announcement ringing in her ears; something like, “God has favored you, he’s elected you, he’s chosen you, he’s looked over the earth and he’s favored you, Mary. Do you remember hearing in the reading in synagogue that a virgin would give birth to a child? That’s you, Mary!”

Do you know what that word “favor” literally means? It’s the word for grace, undeserved favor, and unmerited love. This word describes the essence of how we are saved, loved, and embraced by God. Mary was saved by grace and chosen by God to be a recipient of grace.

The same is true for all who become Christians; we’re chosen by God to be recipients of grace, because God’s favor is upon us. If you are a Christian, God has given you grace—he’s favored you. We don’t deserve it. Every true Christian stands alongside Mary as one who has been favored by God.

If the first question is, “God, why would you favor her?” the answer is, because he’s good. There’s no reason beyond that. God could have looked down and said, “I’ll pick a wealthy young woman,” or, “I’ll pick a successful, significant woman,” or, “I’ll pick a beautiful town, a palace, so that the Son of God can grow up in affluence, wealth, prominence, and significance.” Instead, God chooses Mary. God sees us all as valuable which isn’t dependent on where we live, how much we have, what we do, or how “significant” the world sees us. Our value comes from being created in God’s image, period.

That’s amazing. This is better than religion. Religion is all about what you do to earn God’s favor, but Christianity is all about God favoring you by grace, taking somebody from nowhere and giving them love. That’s what he does. That’s why we can’t stop singing of how wonderful this God is and why Mary bursts in to song.

A new script

Gabriel proceeds to tell Mary the amazing news: Your son will be named Jesus, which means, “God saves from sins.” Her son will be God’s Son and her Savior.

Mary hears the plan, and her response is legendary: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Here is a woman from a simple town with a simple faith, but it’s a sincere faith. She possibly knows very little. She doesn’t have the New Testament; she has bits and pieces of Scripture that she treasures in her heart. But here’s what she does have: faith. She believes what God says. Knowing what God says is of little value apart from believing what God says. Mary believes God.

Many of us have far more information than Mary, and far less faith in it. Mary knows little, but trusts much. Friend, this is amazing. Many of us have a life charted out for ourselves, and we want God to bless it and make it happen. But if God rewrites our script, we usually contend with God, or at least complain to God. Mary was going to marry Joseph, have a wedding, have children, and live a respectable quiet life. The angel Gabriel shows up and says, “New script.”

Culturally, we may not fully appreciate what Mary is willing to sacrifice. She could have lost her fiancé. She did lose her reputation. For the rest of her life, accusations and suspicions will hound her from those who believe the virgin birth story was fabricated to conceal an illegitimate pregnancy.

Mary’s faithful response shows that she does not idolize marriage, her identity, her comfort, or her security above her God. This courageous resolve will one day be emulated by her son. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when God asks the grown man Jesus to atone for the sins of the world through the shedding of his blood, he says, “Your will be done” (Matt. 26:42). There are moments in his life when Jesus echoes his godly mother.

Ten things we learn about Jesus

The Scriptures are all about Jesus, and we learn ten things about Jesus from Gabriel’s announcement of his birth.

One, we learn that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Scripture. Isaiah 7:14 tells us that the virgin will give birth to a child. Who is he? Jesus, Immanuel, God with us. All of Scripture and history is about Jesus, who comes as the fulfillment of Scripture.

Two, we learn that Jesus is fully man. He really is human. He has a mother who birthed him, held him, fed him, changed his diaper, wiped his nose, bathed him, and taught him how to walk and talk. He grows up to be a man. Sometimes the picture of Jesus is wrongly cast that he entered the world speaking syllogisms, combing his hair, reciting Leviticus from memory, and walking around with a halo on his head. God became a man, which means he identified with us from the womb, through birth, and through the seasons of life. He was fully human, a man raised by Mary since he was a baby.

Three, not only was Jesus fully man, he was fully God. When the angel says he is “the Son of God,” that’s a divine title. The Nicene creed tells us Jesus is of the same substance as God the Father. Whatever God the Father is in eternality and attributes, Jesus is the same. God the Father is working in history through God the Son, and God the Son is the second member of the Trinity becoming the God-man Jesus Christ.

Four, Jesus is fully sovereign. We're told that his Father is "the most High God" and that he is "Son of the most High." God alone is the Most High, and Jesus is the Son of the Most High God. This places him alongside God the Father as co-ruler of creation. This reveals Jesus' pre-eminence, prominence, and power.

Five, Jesus is the King. The angel said that he would be "great." In that day, there was a king named Herod whose nickname was Herod the Great. But the angel says that Jesus is the real Great one, who will rule from David's throne. This goes all the way back to the Davidic Covenant, which we read about in 2 Samuel 7:8-16. The promise was made that David would be a king, but that through his family line would come the King of kings who would rule and reign over all kings and kingdoms forever. We are told clearly in this text that Joseph was from the family line of David, so when he adopted Jesus, he adopted Jesus into the family line of David in fulfillment of the prophecy of Samuel.

Six, we learn that Jesus is eternal. The angel says that he will rule and reign forever, and he will have a kingdom with no end. The Son of God lived before his birth, and he lives after his resurrection and ascension. He eternally exists without beginning or end, and he will reign forever. His kingdom has no end.

Seven, we hear from the angel that Jesus is powerful because nothing is impossible with God. Jesus is the God who can do anything, including entering history as a man.

Eight, Jesus is sinless. The angel declares that Jesus would be "holy"; that as Adam had no earthly father and was to be the head of all humanity, when he sinned, we all inherited his corruption and sin nature. Then comes Jesus, the second Adam. He likewise has no earthly father, and where Adam fails, Jesus succeeds. Where we are condemned in Adam, we are redeemed in Jesus because he is holy and sinless. When he died, it was not for his sins, because he had none, but for our sins so that we might be forgiven. He is in fact holy and sinless without any sin in nature or action.

Nine, Jesus is our Savior. We are all sinners by nature and choice. We sin by thought, word, and deed through omission and commission. None of us can stand before God and say that we have lived a perfect life. We are all guilty, and Jesus is the one who is our Savior. He forgives us, he embraces us, and he loves us. That's what he alone does.

Ten, Jesus is humble. This announcement wasn't made to the multitudes, but just to one woman. It wasn't made in a big town; it was made in Nazareth. It wasn't made to a rich woman; it was made to

a poor woman. Jesus didn't grow up in a large house; he grew up in a small house. He didn't have access to the best education; he was in a small town with many illiterate people. Jesus didn't grow up wearing the finest clothes; he dressed simply. His father wasn't a king; his daddy was a carpenter, and he helped his dad put food on the table for his family. Jesus didn't get to travel the world and have amazing experiences. He stayed pretty close to his hometown of Nazareth. Jesus was humble. Jesus came in humility to the humble peasant teenager Mary.

Religious thinking tells us to do our best, try harder, and achieve more so that God will love us. In contrast, the story of Mary is that God looks down, has favor, and gives grace to those who don't deserve it and can't afford it. He loves them, he embraces them, and he gives meaning, value, and purpose to their life. He changes them because he is altogether good. That's why we love Jesus so much more than religion.

Religion is only for the good people, or that's what they think. Those who are religious like the Pharisees think they are good but are often the least grace giving of all. Jesus died for the sinners, the broken, the rebels, the failures, the hard hearted, the stiff necked, the illiterate, the peasants, the poor, the outcasts, the marginalized, and the weak.

Grace is all it takes. If Jesus is humble enough to be with Mary, isn't it wonderful that to this day he is humble enough to come and be with us?

Jesus wants to be with you, not because you are amazing, but because HE is. He is the God of grace. That's amazing.

DOING

Don't make too much of Mary—or too little of her

In considering the life of Mary, history, theologians, traditions, and agendas quickly set in. Some make far too much of Mary, and some make far too little of her. Mary was not sinless (Luke 2:22). She did not remain a virgin forever (Matt. 1:24-25; 12:46). She is not a co-mediator or co-redeemer alongside Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5). We're to pray to our Creator and not to anyone he has created.

Just because some Christian traditions have elevated Mary to an unhealthy state, however, does not mean we cannot honor her. Mary should not be our object of faith, but she should be an example of faith Martin Luther rightly said. Every man and woman should aspire to have faith like Mary's. By the grace of God, we should aspire to love God, trust God, and serve Jesus like she did. We should long to have the same kind of heartfelt devotion and affection for Jesus as she did. Furthermore, she is an

amazing example for everyone, especially young and single women, for what godly devotion looks like.

Men, remember Joseph

Small-town religious gossip can be brutal. Joseph married a single mom and adopted her son. Joseph had to deal with the fact that his boy was called illegitimate, his wife was called unfaithful, and he was called a fool for the rest of his life. He didn't have to accept this fate. Joseph would have been well within his rights to abandon Mary—technically, he could have even sought to have her stoned to death for adultery. But God told Joseph to love Mary and raise the child, and that's exactly what Joseph did. Thanks to Joseph's humble obedience, Jesus had a dad. And Matthew 1-2 provides more details about him. For you single men reading this, do not overlook the single mothers God places in front of you as a possible wife for your consideration. It is almost certain that when Joseph sat in his youth group with his friends and compiled a list of qualities he was looking for in a wife, the virgin Joseph did not include "pregnant" on his ideal list. Yet, there is no more godly and glorious woman, wife, and mother the world has ever known than Mary.

Ask questions, but trust God

The elderly priest Zechariah met Gabriel with a question, and the angel responded by silencing the old man for nine months: "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years" (Luke 1:18). Mary met Gabriel with a question and received no such rebuke: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34).

What's the difference? Mary's question is about understanding, not unbelief. Mary doesn't argue. She doesn't disagree. She doesn't try to explain to Gabriel where babies come from. She basically says, "I believe that can happen, how's it going to work?" That's a fair, honest question.

You can believe in Jesus—that he is God, that he died for your sins, that he rose for your salvation—and still have questions. Christianity is certainly big enough, and God is certainly mysterious enough, for questions. Anselm, an ancient theologian, spoke of faith seeking understanding. We believe, and we are trying to understand. That's the life of faith.

Believe the impossible

God can take an elderly woman like Elizabeth and open her womb. God can take a virgin like Mary and give her a son. "For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). Do you believe that? Do you believe that it is not only true for Elizabeth, but also others including you?

God can create everything out of nothing. God can take on human flesh and enter into human history as

the man Jesus Christ. God can atone for the sin of the world on a chunk of wood. God can rise from death. God can raise us from death. God can hear and answer prayer. God can take enemies and make them friends.

Nothing is impossible with God. That's why Christians can be joyful and hopeful even amidst horror. That's why we sing and pray. Our God is a God of the impossible.

PRAYING

- Joseph and Mary are incredible examples of faith, worthy of honor. Who else do you look to as an example, not of perfection but of genuine faith in action?
- Has God given you a script for your life that is different than the one you had in mind? How have you responded? How do you need to align yourself with his will for your life?
- What questions do you have about Jesus and Christianity? Do you ask your questions with a humble attitude, ready to learn, or a confrontational attitude, ready to argue?
- Where do you see evidence of God's favor in your life? Take a few minutes to thank him for this grace.

Chapter 4: The Family Reunion

READING

Luke 1:39-45

Mary Visits Elizabeth

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

LEARNING

Mary and Elizabeth. One is young, the other is old. One is not yet married, the other has been married for many years. One is a virgin, the other is not. But both are godly women with world-changing sons in their wombs.

In the cultural day of the New Testament, women were often marginalized, particularly those who were young, poor, and single, and those who were elderly, poor, and childless. This is especially true if they lived away from major urban centers and were not connected to powerful families. Mary and Elizabeth fit all of those criteria. They are among the least likely to be chosen for something significant.

Mary takes a trek

As we pick up the story, we see Mary's immediate obedience to God's word: "In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth." Elizabeth had not publicly announced that she was pregnant. She was home worshipping God, getting the nursery ready, and perhaps celebrating the fact that her husband had been rendered mute for a season. And hearing about this, Mary says in essence, "Well, I've got to go see Elizabeth. I love her. We're close. We're relatives. I'm pregnant. She's pregnant. We need to share in one another's joy!"

So Mary goes on a journey of upwards of a hundred miles. The specific town is not stated in the text, but the region is. This teenage girl walked about a hundred miles, maybe by herself, likely in the hot sun, in danger. She apparently really wanted to see Elizabeth.

The young girl and the older woman finally reunite, “And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb.” We know from previous verses that Elizabeth is about six months pregnant, with a son who would grow up to be known as John the Baptizer, and Mary has just conceived Jesus by a miracle of the Holy Spirit. They come together and the Holy Spirit is present and active in the women and their wombs. John leaps in his mother’s womb, and Elizabeth then begins to prophesy.

Elizabeth’s word from the Lord

Prophecy is where God chooses and uses someone to speak through them. It happens in both the Old Testament and in the New Testament and in our day.

Prophecy is sometimes foretelling the future, predicting future events. About 25 percent of our Bible was prophetic when it was written, predicting future events. Not all prophecy, however, is about what’s going to happen. A declaration of truth, insight, rebuke, or encouragement can also be considered prophecy as it is a timely word from God. Sometimes, prophecy is a personal message; God wants someone to know something, so he sends a messenger to deliver a word to that individual. This is the kind of prophecy we see from Elizabeth.

Where did Elizabeth’s prophecy come from? In verse 41, Luke tells us, “Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit takes this woman and her deepest desires and brings them to life: “And she exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!’” (Luke 1:42)

Spirit-filled Elizabeth declares children to be a blessing. This flies in the face of modern thinking, as God's word often does. Our culture tends to treat children like a curse, causing stretch marks, sleep deprivation, and expenses to their parents. But the Bible is clear: Children are not a bane, but a blessing. As Psalm 127:3 says, “Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward.”

Elizabeth continues to honor Mary, which is unusual since it was customary for the younger to honor the older. And not only does she honor Mary, Elizabeth also honors Mary’s baby. Elizabeth is the first person in the Bible to call Jesus Christ “Lord”! Even though he is just recently conceived, Elizabeth rejoices to enter into the presence of Jesus. The baby is the Lord, and she worships him right there in

his pre-born state.

“And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” Elizabeth says (Luke 1:43). She hasn’t seen him walk on water, raise the dead, heal people, die on a cross, or resurrect from death—she hasn’t even seen him be born. But already Elizabeth is astounded to come near Jesus, and already she worships him and claims him as her Lord. Being in the presence of the Lord was all that she and we need to be inspired to worship him.

Unborn babies can worship

In the next moment, the two women draw near one another, and with them the two sons who represent the Old Covenant and the New Covenant; the promises and the fulfillment; the prophet and the Lord. Their bellies come together—and John worships!

This is incredible.

John is in the womb, six months old, predestined by God, saved, elected, chosen, and named—all before he’s ever seen the sunshine, felt the wind, or sipped fresh air into his lungs. He is filled with the Holy Spirit, and we get our first glimpse of John as an in-utero worship leader. He is celebrating in the womb. I can’t think of a stronger portrait for personhood in the womb than that. Elizabeth concludes her outstanding prophecy with these final words: “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Luke 1:45).

DOING

Be in community

Mary goes the extra *hundred miles* to be in community with her relative, Elizabeth. She makes our excuses look pretty pathetic. True, being part of a community may require you to turn off the TV, find your car keys, and perhaps walk all the way to the driveway in order to get in your car and drive for some minutes. If a pregnant teenager can trek a hundred miles in Middle Eastern heat, you can join a small group at your church.

Discern true prophecy

We know Elizabeth spoke faithful prophecy because the Bible tells us she was filled with the Holy Spirit. How can we tell if someone in our day speaks spiritual truth? Ultimately, every possible Word from God must be tested by the perfect Word of God. The following points help this discernment occur:

1. *True prophecy is under biblical authority.* Prophecy isn’t the highest authority; Scripture is. In

Acts 17, Paul, who prophesies some of the New Testament, is teaching to an audience of Bereans. They are described as “noble” because they don’t believe Paul’s words until after testing them against the whole of Scripture (17:11). True prophecy is under, tested by, accountable to Scripture, and must therefore never contradict Scripture.

2. *True prophecy is under godly spiritual authority.* First Corinthians 14 describes proper conduct for church gatherings, providing an orderly framework for prophecy under the oversight of church leadership. This isn’t open mic night at the karaoke bar where anyone can jump out of the pew and take the stage. Godly leaders are responsible for “testing the spirits” (1 John 4:1) and evaluating each prophesy before it’s declared publicly in order to guard the church against false prophets.
3. *True prophecy is true.* A prophet who claims to predict the future must do so with 100 percent accuracy. Anything less, the Bible says, and he or she is a false prophet. Deuteronomy 18:22 says that “when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken.”

In light of the above, it is best whenever we are uncertain to walk the path of humility by saying something like, “I believe the Lord may have said this to me” or, “I would ask you to consider and examine this as I believe it may be from the Lord” rather than saying as the prophets do a few hundred times in Scripture, “thus saith the Lord.” However, in Elizabeth’s case the Spirit was so strong on her and clear through her that she prophesied perfectly. It was included in the Word of God because it was a Word from God.

Worship Jesus

Through the stories of Elizabeth and Mary we see the pattern for faithful worship: God speaks and blesses; we believe and worship. God initiates; we respond. God reveals; we rejoice.

Today, God continues to speak to us by the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures that He has written through his servants like Luke. When we hear from God we are to believe and respond. We are to trust him, obey him, love him, and follow him.

God blesses us in that everything we have—including life itself—is a gift from him. In addition, he has blessed us with Jesus’ life and death in our place, so that we can be forgiven of sin and transformed. He has blessed us with Jesus’ resurrection so that we can have hope for eternal life. He has blessed us with the Holy Spirit so that we can have power, guidance, and comfort in the present life. Anytime we are struggling with worshipping we must focus on remembering who God is and what God has done. As we do, our new nature prompted by the Spirit begins to respond in worship

echoing back the greatness of our great God. This is precisely what we see modeled by Elizabeth, Mary, and John in this section of Luke's gospel.

Defend the defenseless

Luke is a medical doctor, writing under the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit. What does it mean when he says of Elizabeth that, "the baby leaped in her womb"? What does the Bible mean by the word "baby"?

An examination of every time Luke uses this originally Greek word for "baby" shows a consistency. In Luke 1:41, it says, "When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the *baby* leaped in her womb." In Luke 1:44: Elizabeth says, "The *baby* in my womb leaped for joy." It's the same word for baby. This is an unborn, pre-born baby: John the Baptizer.

As we keep reading, Luke 2:12 says, "You will find a *baby* wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." Luke 2:16 then says, "They went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the *baby* lying in a manger." The same word for "baby" is used of the newborn Jesus Christ in a manger as is used for the pre-born John the Baptizer in his mother's womb.

In Luke 18:15-16, when Jesus is grown up, we read, "Now they were bringing even infants to [Jesus] that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, 'Let the *children* come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.'" The same word for John the Baptizer in Elizabeth's womb is the same word used for Jesus lying in the manger, and it is the same word used for the children brought for Jesus to pray over.

The last occurrence from Luke is in Acts 7:19: "[The godless Pharaoh] dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their *infants* so that they would not be kept alive." This verse is describing the infanticide that occurred while the people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt.

The same word is used for an unborn baby, a newborn baby, and young children because God sees them all the same - as people bearing his image and likeness worthy of all rights and dignity. In Elizabeth's womb is a human being made by God, bearing the image and likeness of God, deserving of all of the dignity and value that we ascribe to all other human life. This shows that a baby in a womb is a baby. A baby in a womb is known by God as John was, named by God as John was, can be predestined and chosen for salvation as John was, and can be filled by the Holy Spirit as John was (Luke 1:15).

Elizabeth's baby has a name. He is filled with the Holy Spirit. He worships. He is alive. God is the

Author of life, and only he has the right to define when life begins.

Contrary to what God declares, many cultures, courts, and countries try to differentiate between a newborn baby and an unborn baby. One gets full civil and human rights, but the other does not. But it is impossible to read the Bible and not see life in the womb as anything less than human being.

Of course, this is an emotional and devastating subject that haunts many who have an experience with abortion. Therefore, I'd like to conclude this chapter with a pastoral word of prayer:

I pray the church would be a people who love God and who love the life that God creates. I pray we would see marriage as a covenant, sex within marriage as a gift, and children born as a blessing and not a bane.

I pray that those who have participated in taking the life of an unborn child will know that there is now no condemnation in Christ (Rom. 8:1). Only through Jesus is there forgiveness of sin and new life, and only through Jesus' death can the unjust death of the child be dealt with.

I thank God that he chooses babies in the womb. Over fifty-five million children in the United States alone have been murdered by legal abortions since 1973, and we live in hope and faith that the God who is a Father would adopt these babies as sons and daughters, welcoming them into his heavenly home. I pray that those who never get a chance to hear about Jesus would be filled with the Holy Spirit, just like John from his mother's womb and destined for eternity in the kingdom of our Heavenly Father.

PRAYING

- Do you resist a definition of human life that excludes the unborn? If so, I implore you to discuss this with the Holy Spirit, study the Bible, and allow God to renew your mind and your heart.
- Are you involved with God's people in community? If so, how are you grateful for this community? If not, what sacrifices do you need to make in order to grow in relationship with others?
- How is your worship? Do you trust God's words and appreciate God's blessings in your life? How have you responded to these gifts?
- The Bible resides in authority over any other prophecy or teaching. Who or what are you prone to believe and trust more than Scripture? Your friends? A particular teacher or author? Yourself?

Chapter 5: Worshipping Instead of Worrying

READING

Luke 1:46-56

Mary's Song of Praise: The Magnificat

And Mary said,

*“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”*

And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

LEARNING

Unmarried. Poor. Young. Pregnant with God.

Mary has a lot to worry about.

Rather than worrying, however, we find her worshipping in Luke 1:46-55. Mary belts out a beautiful, spontaneous, anointed, worshipful song in response to God's goodness and long-awaited provision. Worship encompasses all of life, but it most assuredly includes singing. Mary sings, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

What she's saying is that deep down, from a heart made new by the grace of God, she wants to worship the Lord. Her life may be uncertain, but she wants God to be honored and glorified because he is good even when times are hard. Her spirit and the Holy Spirit intersect to honor Jesus—the son in her womb—that God the Father might get praise.

Her song continues and we see more of Mary's heart. Like all of us, she is an image-bearer of God, made to mirror God. She reflects him beautifully in her song, which highlights the love, truth, compassion, justice, selflessness, and humility of God.

Mary is a theologically astute teenage worshipper. Her lyrics are saturated with biblical language drawn from 1 and 2 Samuel, Deuteronomy, Job, the Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah—all of this despite the fact that it would have been very unusual for a woman of her age and upbringing to be formally educated. Perhaps she heard the Scriptures read to her in synagogue each Sabbath and committed them to memory. In any case, she has chosen to live her life top-down: She trusts the Scriptures, she understands who God is, and she lives her life in light of that reality in the most difficult of circumstances.

Her song lists at least 17 attributes of the God she loves, and we'll take a look at these traits now.

1. God is Lord

My soul magnifies the Lord. Mary's God is the Lord, and the Lord is in charge. He is above all other kings, kingdoms, Satan, demons, and religions. Her God and our God, Yahweh, is above everyone and everything. There's no one above him. There's no one alongside of him.

This is of great comfort for her as she looks at her life and her future, wondering what will happen with her fiancé, her reputation, and her family. How will she feed the child? How will she raise God? Her response to these questions is: "The Lord's in charge. I trust him."

2. God is Savior

My spirit rejoices in God my Savior. Some Christian traditions believe that Mary was sinless; she was not. In this song, Mary herself expresses her need for a Savior. We're all sinners and, like Mary, we all need a Savior.

Scripture is God's story of human history, and he enters into it on a rescue mission as the hero. Ultimately, Mary's Savior will be her son. Jesus will be born, live without sin, die for her sin, and rise for her salvation. Her son will be her Savior, and he's our Savior as well.

3. God is omniscient

He has looked on the humble estate of his servant. Mary describes God as omniscient, which means all-knowing. Her God knows everything. He sees her "humble estate." He knows that she is young, poor, pregnant, and without a lot of resources at her disposal. He knows that her reputation is going to be destroyed. He knows that her life is going to be difficult and complicated. Our God knows.

Our view of God is so incredibly important. Some say that all religions teach the same thing, but that is untrue. Many spiritual traditions teach that God is not a person but a force. *He* doesn't pay attention to you; *it* is just an energy that surrounds you. But our God is personal. He's alive. He thinks, he feels, he speaks, he loves, he knows. He pays attention. There are a lot of people in this world, but God knows everyone by name. He's a Father who is attentive to the details in the lives of his sons and daughters.

Even if no one seems to care about Mary, she rejoices that God knows her, loves her, and pays attention to her need. If you believe God knows you like that, you'll sleep differently, live joyfully, and evangelize passionately.

4. God is dignified

From now on all generations will call me blessed. Life may not be so easy right now, but Mary sees the long view of things. She doesn't cling to her reputation as an idol, however, and God gives Mary the dignity that others do not.

In most religions, the gods or goddesses strip away your dignity. They shame, they take, and they demand. Our God gives dignity to us. Have you been beaten, molested, abused, cheated on, abandoned, lied about, or betrayed? Dignity has been taken from you. But the God of the Bible is a dignified God; he gives dignity to you calling us his own sons and daughters. Our God is only, always and altogether dignified giving dignity to his people.

5. God is mighty

He who is mighty. Mary knows that God is powerful. This doesn't mean that everything goes perfect, or that life is always easy, or that we'll win every single time. But it does mean that as history marches forward we know the end, and we belong to the King who wins. Ultimately, no one and no thing can thwart God. Satan, demons, sin, and circumstance cannot thwart God. He is powerful. He is

mighty. The Almighty is mighty for his glory and our good.

6. God is personal

He has done great things for me. Mary celebrates that God has done great things “for me.” Her God is not merely an intellectual concept; he’s not a distant deity far removed from human experience. His work through Mary will be a blessing to millions—billions even—but she describes his greatness in personal terms that reveal a God who loves not just people in general, but individual people because he is personal and cares for us personally.

7. God is holy

Holy is his name. All he does flows from who he is. God is perfectly good. He doesn’t do evil; he only does good. It breaks my pastor’s heart when Christians come to me with very difficult circumstances, wondering if God is punishing them. The answer is no, because God is holy. If you’re a Christian, all of your sin was placed on Jesus. He suffered, he was punished, and he died in your place, for your sins, on the cross. If the Father punished the Son *and* punished you, that would be unholy because it would be unjust.

There are natural consequences for sin. If you do not eat well you will not enjoy wellness. If you do not study you will not learn. We reap what we sow. But God does not punish you; God loves you. He does great things for you, and he is holy. Mary had difficult life circumstances but trusted in the goodness of her holy God. When circumstances are painful and people are awful it is vital to remember that God is holy, or different, altogether, only and always good.

8. God is merciful

His mercy is from generation to generation. Mary says that God’s mercy extends from generation to generation. When we read that God is merciful, that means he withholds from us the justice that we deserve as sinners. He replaces it with grace, giving us good things we don’t deserve. Most of us can’t endure a lifetime with certain people—I have a hard time putting up with myself sometimes—but God is good to a thousand generations. The mercy of God is mindboggling and legacy transforming. God is so rich in mercy that he already has it stored up ready to pour out on your great-great-great-grandkids that will not even be born until your life on earth has long ceased.

9. God is worthy

His mercy is for those who fear him. God is worthy for people to fear him. God deserves reverence, awe, respect, submission, and obedience. Who else are you going to trust? What else will you rejoice in? Who else is going to be the center of your life and the source of your identity? Someone or something will be, but God is the only one worthy to be revered, respected, praised, honored, and

loved.

We become like who or what we worship. If you worship God, who is merciful, compassionate, loving, kind, and generous, you become more like him. If you put anyone or anything else in that god-like position of centrality, preeminence, and prominence in your life, you become like whatever you worship, and it gets worse every day. Mary reminds us that God is the one to be feared and revered because he alone is worthy.

10. God is powerful

He has shown strength with his arm. Mary says God is powerful, and she uses this analogy: “He has shown strength with his arm.” God will not do everything we want him to do, but God can do whatever he wants to do. Psalm 115:3 says, “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.”

God is more capable, more competent, and more commanding than anyone or anything—including sin. He’s more powerful than alcohol, addiction, and abuse. He’s more powerful than any sadness, situation, or even Satan. God is not a physical being, but Mary uses the metaphor of a strong arm. Think of a soldier who pulls someone out of harm’s way. Think of a firefighter who drags someone out of a burning building. Think of a father who reaches into the water to pull out his drowning child. God is like that. His strong arm is like that.

11. God is sovereign

He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones. These are aggressive words for a pregnant teenage peasant girl in a rural town.

Mary had no human or civil rights as we know them today. Most likely, she would not have been permitted to buy property or testify in court. On the scale of value in her culture at that time, as a young, unmarried, pregnant teenage woman, she was just above cattle and livestock. And she was under the throne of Caesar. In her song, however, she proclaims that Caesar is not Lord—God is. Above Caesar’s cute little man-made throne looms a much bigger heavenly throne. Her King rules over all kings, and his kingdom rules over all kingdoms.

He’s the sovereign one, who even knows the thoughts of people’s hearts. If they’re proud, he takes them down. If they’re seated on thrones, ruling and reigning as bullies, thugs, and abusers, God strikes them down with the strength of his hand. He defends the widow, the weak, the poor, and the oppressed. Mary’s confidence is not in Mary. Mary’s confidence is in her God.

One day, God will establish his eternal kingdom. This kingdom was inaugurated at the resurrection of

Jesus, it grows through the preaching of the gospel and the expansion of the church, and it will culminate with the second coming of Jesus. On that day, there will be a throne, and Jesus will sit on it. All of the dictators, the rulers, the CEOs, the politicians, the high and mighty, and everyone else will get off their thrones to kneel before the throne of Mary's son. This young girl may not have any power, but she fully trusts in the one who has all power.

12. God is gracious

He has exalted those of humble estate. Mary's God offers hope for the humble and humiliated. He takes those who have been destroyed and gives them dignity. He takes those who, in the world's eyes, have little value or purpose and he bestows on them great worth.

God gives grace to those who are disgraced. God lifts up those who are beaten down. To the disregarded and discarded God gives encouragement and exaltation. This unshakeable faith allows Mary to look beyond her difficult today trusting God for a different tomorrow.

13. God is generous

He has filled the hungry with good things. Have you ever been hungry? For some, gluttony and not hunger is the real issue. We are obese because we eat too much, and our god is our stomach, to use Paul's language (Philippians 3:19). To many, hunger means we had to wait ten or fifteen minutes longer than we wanted to before our next meal.

Of course, sadly many people live with the pain of actual hunger. Mary was poor. She knew what it was like to have hunger, but she worships a generous God who gives generously. He provides physical and spiritual nourishment, and all who look to Jesus will enjoy a great feast at the wedding supper of the Lamb in the end (Rev. 19:9).

Mary celebrates the generosity of God. She's exceedingly glad that God knows her, loves her, and will take care of her. It doesn't mean that everything will be easy. It doesn't mean that she will never get hungry. But when she does, she can know that God likes to give good things, and he will work it out according to his will.

14. God is just

The rich he has sent away empty. God doesn't let people steal and exploit forever, but he takes it away from them in the end and sometimes even before then. God will ultimately reclaim and redistribute all that is his—and *all* is his. In God's forever kingdom, the hungry will be fed. The poor will be housed. The needy will be cared for. The marginalized will be protected.

That kingdom ethic is supposed to exist among God's people today. Everything we have is entrusted to us by God, and we're to steward it well. Making money is not sinful, depending on how you get it and what you do with it. If God makes you rich, and you're generous in response, then praise God. If God makes you rich but you're greedy and stingy, you'll eventually walk away empty handed as a consequence of being hard hearted.

15. God is humble

He has helped his servant Israel. God is humble, and he helps his people. We have a tendency to approach God with the question, "God, what do you want me to do for you?" The truth is that he doesn't need us; we need him. Our God is a giver, not a taker. Mary celebrates the fact that God is willing to get involved in our lives, our messes, and our needs in order to help us. We all need help, and God thankfully loves to help. In this way, God is a Father who rejoices in helping his sons and daughters who desperately need him.

16. God is faithful

He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring. Mary praises God for his faithfulness to generations. God honors his word. Always. If he says he is going to do something, he will do it. If he makes a promise, he keeps it. He is a faithful God, even to an unfaithful people, even to us, even to you.

17. God is eternal

Forever. God is eternal. None of these wonderful characteristics of God will ever expire. Our God is Lord, Savior, all-knowing, dignified, mighty, personal, holy, merciful, worthy, powerful, sovereign, gracious, generous, just, humble, and faithful forever. He will always be good, and he does not change. In this life, when we find ourselves in ongoing circumstances of languish and loss we are prone to say despairingly, "nothing ever changes." But when it comes to God, we can exuberantly say, "you are never changing." God is not only glorious, great, and good, he is "forever."

DOING

Sing

Song is a means of enjoying, honoring, recognizing, and proclaiming God. Human beings were made to sing—that doesn't mean we're all good at it, but we can all honor God through song. The first human words recorded in the book of Genesis are a song; before sin entered the world, Adam sings a song to his wife in the presence of God. The book of Revelation says that we'll sing new songs in Jesus' presence someday. We love music and even sing along in our cars when no one is listening because we were made to sing.

We also sing because our God sings. In Zephaniah 3:17 we read that a day is coming when God himself will delight over you with song. Can you imagine what it's going to be like when God sings over his people?

Later in Luke 15:10 we read that, "there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (NIV). Who's in the presence of the angels? God. God himself rejoices when we repent. God is happy when we repent. God sings when we repent. If God rejoices when we confess our sin and trust in Jesus, there should be rejoicing with us. If God's happy, we should be happy. If God's singing, we should be singing. If God's celebrating, we should be celebrating.

If we don't sing, it may be because we're thinking more about us than about him. We're self-conscious, or we're thinking about our sin, not our Savior. Admittedly, singing is not always the most natural exercise, for men in particular. In some cultures, the men used to sing in bars and today they sing in stadiums if their soccer team scores a goal. But in many nations, including my own, men simply don't get together and sing. This was one of the hardest things for me when I became a Christian. My baseball team and my football team never burst into song. When my dad, my brothers, and I were out working on the car, trying to drop a transmission, we never stopped for musical interludes like some mechanic musical.

But consider this: If you're willing to leap out of your seat, raise your hands, and lift your voice when something amazing happens during a sporting event, the empty tomb warrants at least that same level of joy. Jesus is a warrior-king who defeats Satan, sin, death, and hell and in great love forgives and embraces. He stands up to all of the abusers, the dictators, the evildoers, and the thieves. He feeds the hungry and gives sight to the blind. He's destroying the darkness of sin with the light of his holiness. He puts a boot on the neck of Satan. He guarantees a kingdom where there will be one throne; he'll sit on it, and we'll all be blessed. Call it singing or call it a battle cry of victory, either way Jesus is well worth a shout, and Jesus' mother Mary is a wonderful example of a worshipper.

Replace worry with worship

One of the lessons we learn from Mary's example is to replace worry with worship. It's okay to be concerned about your life, and to make plans for your future. But Jesus says do not worry (Matt. 6:25-34). Worship is what we can do instead of worry.

Mary was a young woman with a lot to worry about, but she sings instead because she understands the goodness and richness of God's character. Her theology (who God is) shapes her biography (who she is) and culminates in doxology (how she lives her life, in worship). She doesn't start her song with

all of her concerns or complaints toward God. Instead, she proclaims who God is, and the truth of his goodness eclipses all other concerns and carries her through tough times.

Worship your way into worship

What if the worry is simply too overwhelming? What if you don't feel like worshipping? I'll let you know a little secret: You worship your way into worship. You don't sing because you always feel it. Sometimes you sing until you feel it.

When you're suffering, struggling, and sinning, Satan can whisper in your ear, "God is hurting you," or, "God is tired of you." But Satan is a liar. God does great things. Satan wants you to run *from* God rather than *to* him. He wants you to be worrying, rather than worshipping.

What are you absolutely distressed about right now? Have you worshipped about it? A strange thing happens when we shift our focus from our problems to God's glory. He gets bigger, which puts our worry in perspective. That's not to say that God trivializes our suffering; on the contrary he sympathizes with us (Hebrews 4:15). But his goodness, his power, his grace, his love is large enough to absorb all of the sin and pain and heartache of the world, relieving the burdens that would crush us if we tried to carry them.

Keep a journal

If you struggle with despair and discouragement, or maybe even depression, let me submit to you one thing that may be very helpful: record evidences of God's grace toward you. Like Mary, it will help you to say, "He has done good things for me."

What has God forgiven you of? What is he teaching you? How is he changing you? Who has he put in front of you? What circumstances has he delivered you from? What opportunities is he calling you to? Your whole life might change if you could readily look back and know with confidence, *He's done great things for me.*

Replace anxiety with history

Mary has two options in light of all that has happened in her life. She can either give in to anxiety, or she can focus on history: *What has God done?*

In moments of crisis and doubt, choosing anxiety will lead to paralyzing fear about the future. Instead, Mary remembers God's grace toward Abraham and the nation of Israel. She recognizes that the culmination of God's promises is to be fulfilled in her son, the Savior of the world. She trusts that God has been working on this for thousands of years, and she believes that he is good on his word.

Trust that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Cling to it like a drowning victim adrift at sea clings to a life ring. It doesn't mean that everything will be fixed, but you will keep your head on straight, and you will be able to worship your way through it. Find a way to glorify God so that you might have joy and a reason to sing. Read Scripture, read church history, and read biography. Get to know people and hear the story of God's work in their lives, so you can replace anxiety with history. God has been good, and he will be good, because he is the same God yesterday, today, and forever.

PRAYING

- Sing a prayer to God. If you don't know any songs or how to carry a tune, read Mary's song aloud as worship.
- What worries or stresses does your mind drift toward throughout the day? How can you worship God and fight for joy in these moments?
- Meditate on the seventeen attributes of God found in Mary's song. Which attribute(s) do you find most comforting? Why?
- Whether or not you decide to keep a regular journal, at least make a list of at least five evidences of God's grace in your life. Share them with your community and rejoice together, like Mary, Elizabeth, and John.

Chapter 6: The Greatest Man Who Has Ever Lived

READING

Luke 1:57-80

The Birth of John the Baptist

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

Zechariah's Prophecy

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,

*"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people
and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us
that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*

*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

LEARNING

At the age of 26 my wife and I welcomed our first child into the world. I can still remember how excited and overwhelmed I felt awaiting her arrival. Would we have a boy or a girl? Would she be healthy? Would mom be okay through the delivery? I cannot express in words what it felt like to hold our child, but every parent knows what I'm talking about.

Have you ever waited expectantly for the birth of a child you loved and could not wait to meet? That is the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

This barren and broken elderly couple had been waiting for decades to be graced with the gift of a baby. Additionally, the world had been awaiting the arrival of their son for hundreds of years since the prophets promised his coming.

Now, John's birth has finally arrived, and we get to share in Zechariah and Elizabeth's joy as they celebrate the birth of their son. Everyone was clamoring to name the child; it's amazing how some things never change. All of the relatives pressured the couple to stick with tradition and name the boy Zechariah, after his father.

Elizabeth tried to explain that the angel Gabriel had already instructed them to name the child John. The people looked to Zechariah for confirmation, but he was still unable to speak, ever since his initial unbelief that he would ever be a father. He can still communicate, however, so Zechariah takes up a pen and paper and writes, "His name is John."

"And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed," Luke tells us, "and he spoke,

blessing God” (Luke 1:64). The first words out of Zechariah’s mouth in nine long months are words of prophetic praise to the Lord.

All of this provoked wonder in the people of this quiet little town. The Bible tells us that they thought, “What then will this child be?” (Luke 1:66) We learn from Gabriel, Zechariah’s prophesy, and Jesus’ word later on that, other than Jesus, this child John will be no less than the greatest man who ever lived.

John the Great

If we took a nationwide poll to name the greatest person history has ever known, it’s highly unlikely that John the Baptizer would even crack the top ten or top thousand. Jesus is in a category of his own: God incarnate. But the Bible is clear that John is preeminent among the rest of us who are not members of the Trinity.

First of all, we read in Luke 1:15, that John “will be great before the Lord.” Jesus makes it even clearer a few chapters later saying, “I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John” (Luke 7:28).

This is an incredible statement, especially when you consider the fact that John spent the majority of his life living in obscurity. He began his public ministry in his late twenties or early thirties, and although he drew a lot of attention, it only lasted a few months before Jesus showed up. John was thrown in prison shortly thereafter, where he was beheaded as a young man.

What was so great about this bug-eating, honey-chugging, gospel-preaching, sinner-baptizing eccentric? From Zechariah’s prophesy and elsewhere in the gospels, we can glean at least seven aspects of John’s greatness and true greatness in the sight of God.

1. John came from Spirit-filled parents

Both John’s mother Elizabeth and his father Zechariah were filled with the Holy Spirit. In Luke 1:41 we read, “Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit” and then prophesies over Mary. In Luke 1:67, “Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied” over his son at birth.

Zechariah and Elizabeth loved the Lord, served faithfully in ministry, and waited until old age for God to bless them with a child, without getting bitter or committing adultery like Abraham and Sarah had previously. We cannot choose our parents, but if we have godly parents like John’s, we can choose to follow in their faithful footsteps. This is what John did, by God’s grace.

Depending on what sort of experience you've had with different denominations and traditions in Christianity, the whole idea of being "Spirit-filled" can raise a lot of questions and concerns.

But Luke—in both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts—provides a biblical understanding of what it means to be Spirit-filled. One thing we learn from the examples he shares is that the work of the Spirit manifests itself in a lot of different ways, but the result is always that people are empowered for ministry to glorify God. The Spirit comes in, and the life of Jesus goes out—sometimes through worship, sometimes through prophecy, sometimes through preaching, sometimes through healing, sometimes through service... being Spirit-filled looks a little different in each situation, but what is common is that the life of Christ pours out the life of a Christian.

Luke tells us on numerous occasions that Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit throughout his gospel. Simply put, being Spirit-filled means to be like Jesus by God's power. We know the Spirit is at work when people love Jesus, when they worship Jesus, when they serve Jesus, when they want to be like Jesus, when they want to forgive like Jesus, when they want to love like Jesus, and when they confess their sin to Jesus, because the Holy Spirit loves to show off Jesus. In fact, he inspired the writing of the whole Bible to reveal to us the person and the work of Jesus.

Zachariah and Elizabeth are filled with the Holy Spirit and immediately worship Jesus. They aspire to love him and be like him, because the Spirit has filled them. And their son John follows in their footsteps.

2. John was filled with the Holy Spirit

John himself was also filled with the Holy Spirit. Before John's birth, the angel Gabriel said, "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15). The Bible also says, "The hand of the Lord was with him" (Luke 1:66). That's another way of saying that the Holy Spirit was present with him, through him, and in him through the course of his life.

This is important, because when we look at characters in the Bible, it is common to merely moralize. We look at the good things they did, we look at the bad things they did, and then we conclude, "Do the good things and don't do the bad things." The problem with moralizing is that it tries to change the fruit (human behavior) without changing the root (human nature). You don't even need to be a Christian to moralize Scripture. It is one of the great errors in Bible teaching. And it can lead to moral people separated from God destined for hell, but tragically unconcerned because they have good values gleaned from religious texts.

John did not become the greatest man who ever lived through morality and good behavior, but by the

power of the Holy Spirit. As we look at the life of John, the point is not to merely do what John did, but to be transformed through, filled with, and empowered by the same Holy Spirit who made John great and gave him great ministry. The Spirit will make you moral, but that's a by-product and not the main thing. His goal is not to just make you better, but to make you new.

3. John humbly prepared the way for Jesus

After John was born, Zechariah prayed a prophecy over his newborn son: "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways" (Luke 1:76).

John's role was to get people ready for Jesus. John humbly prepared the way for Jesus rather than using Jesus to build his own fame. He certainly could have exploited the opportunity. John was something like a rock star in his day once his public ministry began. There had not been a prophet for some 400 years until John opened his mouth and the Spirit anointed his preaching. He was a bit of a wild man who grew up in the wilderness and was not owned by the religious establishment. He was young, charismatic, strong, eccentric, and fearless. Crowds flocked to him.

Yet, John was not all about John. John was all about Jesus.

"After me comes he who is mightier than I," John said, "the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie" (John 1:27, ESVUK). As his stock was at an all-time high and his first tour just starting, John said he was unworthy to do the work of a slave for Jesus Christ. Later, when his fame was hotter than ever and he could have cashed it all in for a huge ministry, he set it all aside, sent all his disciples to follow Jesus, and said, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

4. John was an evangelist

Zechariah proclaimed that John's ministry would be "to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God" (Luke 1:77-78).

Here's the bottom line: People either belong to Satan, or they belong to God; they're going to hell, or they're going to heaven. That's it. Everyone who has ever lived fits in one of those two categories. Race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic background, and sexual preference, are all secondary. The big issue is two teams: Satan-hell and Jesus-heaven. Salvation is being saved from hell to heaven, from Satan to Jesus, from sin to forgiveness, from death to life and from enemy to friend.

When you tell people about salvation through Jesus, that's called evangelism. And salvation is this:

You and I have sinned against a holy and righteous God; he has come into human history as the man Jesus Christ to reconcile men and women to God; he's lived the life we have not lived, the life without sin; he's died the death we should have died, the death for sin; and he has risen to give the gift we cannot earn, forgiveness of sin. This gift is ours through repentance and faith. We turn away from sin and toward Jesus, acknowledging our need for his forgiveness and righteousness.

John was an evangelist. He did not settle for just doing good deeds or giving good advice - as good as they are. He kept preaching the bad news of sin and the good news of salvation, even though he knew that by preaching repentance he would be despised, hated, and opposed. But he loved God and he loved people. John knew that people were bound for hell, and he wanted them to go to heaven. He knew that people were enslaved by Satan and sin, and he wanted them to be liberated and children of God.

John never got tired of preaching repentance. The number is uncertain, but insofar as we can tell, most commentators agree that the Holy Spirit working through John converted thousands of people in a short period of time.

5. John made the invisible kingdom visible

Zechariah's prophesy mentions, "a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" (Luke 1:69). This is the ancient language of kingship.

King David was Israel's most famous ruler. He ushered in a golden age unprecedented in the ancient world that continued on through his son and successor, King Solomon. This kingdom was only meant to foreshadow God's true, perfect, forever kingdom where Jesus is the true, perfect, forever King.

King Jesus told his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18). Jesus rules over all times, nations, places, cultures, languages, tribes, and lifestyles of people. He rules over the angels and the demons. He rules over the rich and the poor, the living and the dead. The book of Revelation tells us that Jesus is already seated on the throne in heaven. His invisible kingdom will one day be established on the earth with his second coming, and the invisible kingdom will be made visible. In the meantime, what we see are the visible kingdoms of the earth.

In his prophecy, Zechariah describes God's kingdom as marked by redemption, salvation, mercy, deliverance, holiness, righteousness, light, and peace. In contrast, he describes the kingdoms of the earth as "those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death."

Older Protestant theologians were fond of saying that one of the functions of Christians in general and

the church in particular is to make visible the invisible Kingdom of God. That's the prophecy that Zechariah has for his son, that he would make the invisible kingdom visible, and that's what John did.

6. John obeyed God's call on his life

Zechariah's prophecy echoes Gabriel's words in Luke 1:17, saying John "will go before the Lord to prepare his ways (Luke 1:76).

John was a great man, but God gave him a difficult call. As a student of Scripture, John would have been keenly aware that most of God's prophets lived lonely lives that usually ended in exile, murder, or both. If you stand up against a whole nation and tell them that they're all religious and wicked and God is displeased, you'll probably make more enemies than friends.

That's precisely what happened to John. He was thrown in prison and beheaded after preaching against Herod ("Herod the Great," ironically). John went from known by some to mega tour preacher to imprisoned to dead rather quickly. That's a man who humbly obeyed his difficult call.

7. John avoided adolescence

Following Zechariah's prophecy, the Bible speaks briefly of John's youth: "And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel" (Luke 1:80).

John's public ministry lasted roughly six months—shorter than an academic freshman year at a Bible college. He preached a lot of sermons, baptized perhaps thousands of people, handed his ministry to Jesus, and got martyred—all by the age of about 30. Today, the average 30-year-old guy is getting married for the first time after years of playing video games, acting silly, and wasting time.

John did not consume any alcohol, he did not waver on his mission, and he packed in a lifetime of man's work during his brief 30 years because he did not waste any of his time on earth. Like a soldier off to war, he did not pretend that life was an extended vacation at an all-inclusive resort.

Men, especially young men, who aspire to greatness can learn a lot from John's example. He is Jesus' definition of a great man: one who honors mother and father, is filled with the Holy Spirit, humbly leads others to Jesus Christ, evangelizes lost people, obeys God's call on his life, avoids adolescence, and spends his time not avoiding but getting ready to take on more responsibility.

A great man

John shows us what a great man is. He is filled with the Spirit. He humbly prepares the way for Jesus. He is an evangelist who makes it his life's work to introduce others to Jesus. He is a man who

ultimately is a giver, not a taker. He's a producer, not a consumer.

You want to be a great man? Be a creator and a cultivator. Be a giver, not a taker. Bring life, not death. Don't look for the path of least resistance, but look for the path of greatest glory to God. Follow it even when it's a tough winding uphill path into a stiff headwind, like John did.

Ultimately, Jesus wants real men to be filled with the Holy Spirit like John and Zechariah were. Just as he wants women to be like Elizabeth and Mary, who were also yielded to the Holy Spirit. He wants married couples to love and serve one another and God, like Zechariah and Elizabeth did, and then give birth to children who are filled with the Spirit and serve the Kingdom like John did.

DOING

Aspire to humble greatness

Humility is often misunderstood as passivity or a lack of ambition. Humility does not reject greatness; humility aspires to greatness in a way that pleases God. Humility does not reject recognition; humility directs recognition to Jesus.

Jesus' disciples once asked him, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matt. 18:1) Rather than rebuking them for desiring greatness, Jesus gave them an answer: "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:4).

John was great because he was willing to be the least. "He must increase, but I must decrease," John said of Jesus (John 3:30). Likewise, our path to greatness is not to focus on our humility, but rather focus on Jesus' glory. True humility does not make less of me, but instead makes more of Jesus.

Make the invisible visible

Like John, Christians are citizens of God's invisible kingdom. When we forgive rather than become bitter, when we love rather than hate, when we give rather than take, when we look after rather than exploit those who are needy and poor and marginalized and weak, when we care for the widow and the orphan, when we extend a hand of friendship to our enemies, when we bless those who persecute us, when we love those who hate us, we provide glimpses of God's kingdom to come. This is supernatural fruit imported to earth from the heavenly kingdom by the Spirit.

Making the invisible visible reveals the light of the heavenly kingdom in the midst of the darkness that shrouds our world. We want others to see that our King is a great King, and that his transforming work changes people from the inside out.

Tell people about Jesus

Chances are, your life and ministry will look very different from John's. But if you're a Christian, God has given you a mission field full of people to reach. Family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, enemies—who in your life needs Jesus? We're saved to be sent on mission because there are more people Jesus wants to save, and he wants us to share in the joy of finding them.

Be filled with the Spirit

There's only one commandment in the New Testament that tells us to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 5:18 says, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit." John is the embodiment of that. He wasn't controlled by substances; he was controlled by the Spirit.

When you become a Christian, the Holy Spirit regenerates you. You're born again, and he takes up residence in you and gives you a new heart, a new mind, a new nature, new desires, and a new life. The Bible calls that being baptized or sealed in the Spirit (Acts 1:5; Eph. 1:13).

Every true Christian is filled with the Holy Spirit in this sense. As we see with Zechariah, Elizabeth, John, and other people in the Bible, however, there can be multiple, unique fillings of the Holy Spirit that occur throughout the course of life. These fillings are empowering experiences for the believer to experience more of God's power at work in and through them in love, power, service, healing, deliverance, and victory.

Through faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit will take up residence in you so that you can live a life under the control and power of the Holy Spirit, as John did and as Jesus did during his life on earth.

Jesus compared the Holy Spirit to the wind (John 3:8). Like the wind, the Holy Spirit is always flowing. To be filled with the Holy Spirit simply means that we live our lives like a ship with a sail. When our sail is up, we allow the Holy Spirit to fill us, direct our life, and lead us where he wants us to go, to become who he wants us to be, and to do what he wants us to do. Our sail comes down through unrepentant sin, unbelief, clinging to lies rather than truth, foolish doctrine, and bad life decisions, all of which "quench the Spirit" (1 Thess. 5:19).

Be filled with the Holy Spirit. Put your sail up. Repent, believe, read your Bible, pray, submit, and be in community with God's people. In this way, God will fill you, lead you, guide you, and empower you. He is willing, and if we will avail ourselves to his presence and power he will fill us.

Without the Holy Spirit, Christianity becomes nothing but a list of dos and don'ts. You either live a

decent life and become proud as a result, or you fail to measure up and fall into despair. Neither result leads to the kind of humble joy that comes from the Holy Spirit.

John was filled with the Holy Spirit; that's how he did it. There is no secret. God's power is made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). God's power enables us to be who we cannot be and do what we cannot do because it's God power, not ours. The Christian life is a supernatural life of God at work in us and through us.

PRAYING

- Consider how you spend your time, your money, your thoughts, and your energy. How can you help make the invisible kingdom visible?
- Who do you need to talk to about Jesus and salvation? Be courageous and look for the opportunities the Holy Spirit has provided to have that conversation.
- What are some ways that you can make the invisible kingdom visible in your life and community? How can you use these opportunities to point to Jesus?
- Is your sail up or down? Do you have a relationship of trust and love with the Holy Spirit? If not, ask for prayer from other Christians. If so, thank the Holy Spirit for his specific work and guidance in your life.

Chapter 7: The Birth of Jesus Christ

READING

Luke 2:1-7

The Birth of Jesus Christ

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

LEARNING

Immanuel.

Every Christmas, cards start arriving in the mailbox and songs echo at the mall with the word “Immanuel.” But what does that mean?

About 700 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah wrote: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).

Through Isaiah, we learn that God’s answer to us walking away from him is *Immanuel* running toward us. Immanuel is a title that means, “God is with us.” The promise was given that God would visit our planet by entering human history to lovingly pursue lost people. How would we know that Immanuel had come? When the virgin gives birth to a son.

The prophet Micah provided another clue, about 300 years after Isaiah. The special child would be born in Bethlehem: “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days” (Micah 5:2). In the original Hebrew, “from ancient days” can mean “from

eternity.”

Based on these and other promises, God’s people were anticipating and awaiting this miraculous visitation from God to save and redeem them. Their expectations were fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, which we read about in Luke 2:1-7.

The historical facts of Jesus’ birth

The opening sentences of Luke chapter 2 demonstrate the author’s great attention to historical detail. Luke introduces us to Augustus Caesar, who was ruling at the time that Jesus was born. Augustus Caesar was a very significant political leader who ruled over the Roman Empire, one of the most prominent, longstanding, far-reaching empires in the history of the world. He was the adoptive son of Julius Caesar. His title “Augustus” means “the majestic or highly revered.” Historians say that during his rise to power Augustus Caesar was ruthless, but once he assumed power he became more benevolent. He was a fairly gracious ruler compared to others in his day, far more so than people like King Herod, who was a maniacal man through the totality of his life.

Working under Augustus Caesar was a governor named Quirinius, who enforced and executed policies and decisions from the Emperor. Luke locates the birth of Jesus in a specific historical timeframe by telling us that it occurred during a census ordered by these rulers.

Caesar Augustus reigned over the entire Roman Empire, and Quirinius served as a sort of cabinet member to the senior leader. Caesar would demand a certain action, and a man like Quirinius would execute on the order. In this case, Luke tells us, a census was to be taken, which would have been a means for Caesar to assess his vast power and command maximum tax and military participation from the populace.

On the complete opposite of the spectrum, Luke draws our attention to Joseph and Mary. They are everything that Caesar and Quirinius are not: poor, powerless, rural, worshipping God rather than being worshipped like gods. Nevertheless, the two loved one another, they trusted in God, and they accepted God’s call on their lives. Now, near the very end of Mary’s pregnancy, the census requires the couple to travel to Bethlehem.

Joseph was of the family line of David, and David grew up around Bethlehem. For the census, everyone returned to the original hometown of their particular family. In order to obey the law, Joseph has to take pregnant Mary on a roughly hundred-mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It’s a terrifying prospect, when you think about it, with the very real possibility she could give birth to God on the side of the road far away from any doctor, medical care, or help whatsoever. But God, in his

providential sovereignty, orchestrated history to get this couple from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5:2 about the Savior's birthplace.

Despite a long journey and no place to stay but an animal stable, Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem safely, just in time for Jesus to be born. The Creator and King of the Universe's first throne on earth is a feeding trough for animals. In this humble gesture, however, we see God's sovereign power over governments and history. God arranged the details implemented by everyone from the powerful (Caesar Augustus and Quirinius) to the powerless (Joseph and Mary), not to mention the infinite number of lives and events leading up to that point, in order to fulfill his Word and demonstrate his lordship over all.

Christianity is rooted in the person and work of Jesus and in the historical facts surrounding his birth, life, death, and resurrection. This is a hugely significant point, but even so the facts are not beneficial unless we proceed from the historical to the theological. What is God accomplishing and achieving through the birth of Jesus? Why did Jesus come? What does it all mean?

The theological meaning of Jesus' birth

In order to describe the theological significance of Jesus' birth, theologians like to use a word: *incarnation*. It comes from the Latin meaning, "in the flesh." Incarnation refers to the Christian doctrine that God, who is spirit, took upon himself human flesh and came as the God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of John describes the incarnation well: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1, 14). The Word—the one who was eternally face to face with God the Father as the second member of the Trinity—became a man, the man Jesus Christ. That's the incarnation. The second member of the Trinity entered into history. The Creator entered creation. God who is spiritual took upon himself the physical. That's why we call him Immanuel, "God with us."

I realize that this raises a number of questions. I wrote a book called *Vintage Jesus* with Dr. Gerry Breshears to provide in-depth answers about who Jesus is, but here is a short response to what I believe are the seven most common questions about Jesus' incarnation.

1. Did a person become God?

No. There's a difference between a person becoming God and God becoming a person. Satan lied to Adam and Eve by telling them that they could essentially become God. Any religion that claims people can become God is false. That includes Mormonism and also many Eastern religions and New

Age spiritualities that teach oneness with the divine. We do not ascend toward God—through morality, reincarnation, good works, paying off our karmic debt, trying harder, doing better—God descends to us. The doctrine of the incarnation is not about a person who became God in order to show us how we can be godlike. It’s about how God became a human person because he loves us and he came to rescue us.

2. Did Jesus come into existence at his birth?

Some religions teach that Jesus is not eternally God, but that he is a created being who came into existence at a point in time. We’ve already read in Micah 5:2 and John 1, however, that Jesus’ origins extend to eternity past since before creation. Jesus did not come into existence at his birth. The second member of the eternal Trinity entered into *human* history as the God-man Jesus Christ. The Bible is clear that Jesus is our Creator and was not created, saying of Jesus in Colossians 1:16, “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.” Jesus’ birth was not his creation but rather his entrance into his creation.

3. Is the incarnation borrowed from pagans?

If you have taken a religion course in college, one of the things you probably were told is that Christianity borrows ideas like the virgin birth from pagan mythology. This is untrue. Scripture predates any of the mythologies in question. As we saw, Isaiah’s prophecy takes place 700 years before the virgin birth; but the first allusion of the virgin birth of Jesus is all the way back in Genesis 3:15 when the earth had only two people on it. After our first parents sinned against God, he promises the coming of a savior, born of a woman—no mention of a father. This is notable, because the rest of Genesis is a patriarchal book, tracing numerous family histories through the male line.

In addition, the concepts of pagan mythology were just that: mythology. Even the ancient Greeks did not treat the exploits of Zeus, Athena, and the various gods and goddesses as fact. These stories were more like Spiderman than Nelson Mandela. The Bible, however, presents itself as historical fact evidenced by eyewitness testimony. If anything, the pagans stole their fiction from the facts of the Bible.

4. Did Jesus cease to be God when he became a man?

No, he did not. Jesus proclaims his deity throughout the gospels, and Jesus’ opponents admitted that they wanted to put him to death “because you, a mere man, claim to be God” (John 10:33, NIV). Jesus not only said he was God, but he also did things only God can do, like forgive sin (Mark 2:5). Unless he was God, Jesus had no business forgiving other people’s sins. Jesus didn’t lose his divinity, he

added to it humanity. Jesus Christ is not God-minus; he's God-plus.

5. Is Jesus God or man?

Yes. He's the God-man. He's both.

Theological liberals often emphasize Jesus' humanity and describe him as an exemplary leader who helped the poor, fought for justice, and cared for the widow and orphan. They'll put him in a category similar to Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Mother Teresa.

Theological conservatives, on the other hand, often emphasize Jesus' divinity. His suffering and temptation weren't that big of a deal because Jesus was God and therefore impervious. Like Clark Kent, Jesus looked like a regular guy on the outside, but underneath the Galilean peasant garb he was a man of steel.

The truth is, Jesus was fully man *and* fully God. He lived life perfectly as a man, to serve as our example and a flawless substitute sacrifice in our place. He didn't "cheat" by using his divinity "but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7). At the same time, Jesus never stopped being God. Jesus was one person with two natures: fully God, fully man. And he lived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

6. Did God have intimate relations with Mary?

Mormons believe that God the Father is a flesh-and-blood physical being who had actual intimate relations with Mary and impregnated her as a result. The Bible doesn't teach that at all. The angel Gabriel described the conception to Mary as a miracle of the Holy Spirit. Mary says repeatedly that she's a virgin. Joseph, a godly, honorable man, has been waiting to consummate his marriage with his wife, and it would be a horrendous thing to think that God himself violated Mary.

7. Is the incarnation of Jesus a secondary issue?

Some churches and leaders throughout history, including the present day, have argued that the incarnation is not crucial; we can agree to disagree and it doesn't really matter if Mary was a virgin. There are many reasons, however, to consider the incarnation a primary, non-negotiable element of faithful Christian doctrine. If Mary was not actually a virgin, the implications would be numerous and vast. For example:

- If Mary was not a virgin, then the Bible is not true. Gabriel said that Mary was a virgin. Mary said that she was a virgin. If we don't trust God's word on this point, there is no reason to trust his word elsewhere.

- If Mary was not a virgin, then Scripture remains unfulfilled and our sins are not forgiven. We'd still be waiting for the virgin to give birth to the messiah in Bethlehem to fulfill the prophetic promises of God's Word.
- If Mary was not a virgin, then Jesus' mother was an ungodly and deceptive woman. If Mary concocted a story to hide the fact that she was cheating on Joseph or messing around with Joseph, then the entire story surrounding Jesus' birth is greatly altered.
- If Mary was not a virgin, it would mean that Jesus was just a normal guy. His story is not about Immanuel, God with us, for the fulfillment of Scripture. Instead, it's about someone messing around with someone else and that is not much of a unique story.
- If Jesus was raised by a woman who made up preposterous religious lies to cover up her own bad behavior, why should we believe the extraordinary claims of her or her son?

Jesus is fully God and fully man. We cannot expect to fully understand this mystery here on earth, but thanks to the God-man we will join him in heaven someday, see him face to face, and know fully as Paul tells the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 13:12).

DOING

Jesus' birth is historical: Christianity is based on fact. It is theological: God entered humanity in order to save us. Finally, it is biographical: What does Jesus' birth mean for you and me? What does this possibly have to do with our life?

1. Jesus is like us

Since Jesus is like us, the Bible says, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:15-16).

In other religions, the concept of God is that he is transcendent, far removed from the messy lives of sin and sinners on the earth. But Jesus knows what it's like to have your family turn their back on you. He knows what it's like to have friends betray you. He knows what it's like to be homeless, poor, mocked, lied to, and beaten. He knows what it's like to die. Our God is like us, especially in his suffering.

When you're suffering, hurting, and tempted, you can talk to Jesus and he can sympathize. Our God gets it, because we have a real God with a name and a face: Jesus. He understands us.

2. Jesus is unlike us

If Jesus was completely like us, he would not be very helpful in our suffering. But Jesus can actually do something about it because he's different from us. Unlike us, Jesus never sinned. He was tempted. He suffered. He died. But he did not sin. He said "yes" to the Father and "no" to sin every time.

When we're tempted, we can run to Jesus and he can identify with our struggle. In that moment he can say, "I faced that temptation, too." When we sin, we can also run to Jesus. In that moment he can say, "I said 'no' to that sin, but I died for it anyway. I forgive you. I will save you from the mess you're in, and I will change your whole life." Because he is unlike us and never got into the sinful messes we do, he knows how to keep us out of trouble, and get us out of trouble when we have wandered into harm's way.

3. Jesus came to make us like him

History: Jesus was born in Bethlehem to the Virgin Mary. Theology: Incarnation, God is with us. Biography: Jesus changes us and gives us a new life. If we believe the truth about Jesus by faith, we're reconciled to God from now through eternity.

This changes everything, and it culminates in doxology: life as worship in response to Jesus. Part of this worship is the adoration of Jesus, but it's also being empowered by the Holy Spirit to follow the actions of Jesus. Like Jesus, we're not to separate ourselves from the world, and we're not to enter into the world to participate in its sin and folly. We enter into the world to be a redemptive agent for the world on behalf of the kingdom of God. That is the ministry of Jesus and the mission of Jesus.

God became a man and got his hands dirty. The incarnation compels us to do the same, through his life at work in ours. He is Immanuel, God with us, and also he is Immanuel, God in us at work through us for his glory, others' good, and our gladness.

PRAYING

- How has God worked through unexpected encounters and events to orchestrate his plan for your life? Rather than minimizing these events as coincidence, celebrate them as part of his plan.
- What questions do you still have about the life of Jesus? Ask a friend, study the Bible, read a book. Above all, ask the Holy Spirit to provide the faith to believe.
- Which do you tend to appreciate more: Jesus' humanity (his works and example), or Jesus' divinity (his power and perfection)? How would a more complete understanding of the incarnation change the way you serve, follow, and relate to God?
- In what ways are you becoming more like Jesus?

Chapter 8: The Glorious Announcement for an Unlikely Audience

READING

Luke 2:8-21

The Shepherds and the Angels

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

*"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"*

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

LEARNING

Have you ever wondered what people thought of shepherds in Jesus' day?

People thought shepherds were odd. They lived by themselves, outside of town, sleeping in the open, and surrounded by animals all the time. Their reputation was less than stellar. Shepherds were

stereotyped as crooks and thieves, and they couldn't even testify in court. It didn't help that they couldn't leave their flock without risking their livelihood, which means they couldn't make it to the temple for sacrifices and feasts and maintain the same religious devotion as the rest of God's people. In short, the shepherds were not highly regarded in their society.

When an army of angels lit up the sky to announce God's birth into history, no one would have ever expected them to break the news to a bunch of shepherds. Upon hearing the big announcement, however, the shepherds outside of Bethlehem hurry off to find the baby boy. Besides Mary and Joseph, these anonymous outcasts are the first people in the world to enjoy an audience with Jesus Christ.

It's curious how God arrives in a humble way to a humble family and announces the event to the humble shepherds. God works with them for his glory, by his grace. Years later, Jesus even described himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). God redeems an unpopular profession, showing that he is humble and willing to look after us like sheep.

Listen again for the first time

Luke 2:8-21 is perhaps the most familiar passage in all Scriptures. Linus reads it every Christmas for the Charlie Brown television special. Almost every church in America has a nativity scene stashed somewhere. Many non-Christians even set up a manger scene with the baby Jesus somewhere in their home every December. Almost everyone in the country knows just enough of the Christmas story to project their own meaning into the whole event.

Whether we realize it or not, each one of us lives according to a worldview. It's how you perceive reality, understand God, find purpose in life—all of those big questions of existence. The Christmas story contains profound, life-changing biblical truth. Since it is such a common story, however, people are prone to change the meaning based on their personal worldview, rather than allow the real meaning to change their worldview.

In other words, the true meaning of Christmas could not be more important. The angel's declaration to the shepherds on that night long ago included a number of key statements that clue us in to the significance of what had just happened.

Three big hints

The angel proclaimed Jesus' birth with the words: "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11). There's a lot for us to learn from this statement.

Jesus is the Savior. All religions and worldviews outside of Christianity have one thing in common: God is not the savior. Either you are your own savior, or there's no savior at all. In Christianity, God is the hero, the rescuer, the redeemer, the Savior. This is good news because it gives us hope. If the only hope we have is in ourselves, that's a sad, futile existence. But if there's a Savior, there is hope for us that is beyond us coming to rescue us.

Jesus is the Christ—the anointed king. Like Jesus, King David started humbly. David was a shepherd boy, taking care of his family's flock, when a prophet showed up one day and anointed the boy as the future king of Israel. Before he could ascend to the throne, however, David endured great conflict with his predecessor, King Saul, and patiently prepared for his coronation day. Jesus is like that as a baby. He is the Christ—"anointed"—but until his kingdom is fully realized on earth, there is great conflict between the kingdom of Satan ("the ruler of this world") and Jesus the true king. It's only a matter of time before "the ruler of this world" is deposed and Jesus goes from anointed King to appointed King (John 14:30).

Jesus is Lord. The angel worships Jesus Christ as Lord. This is another kingly title that means Jesus is the ruler over all. This reality should lead us to a deeper appreciation, understanding, and adoration of Jesus the preeminent sovereign of all existence.

The three titles that the angel used to describe Jesus each tell us something important about the identity of Jesus Christ. Savior: Jesus is the hero who saves us from our sin in his death and gives us new hope in his resurrection. Christ: Jesus is the anointed one, chosen for this special purpose. Lord: Jesus is supreme over all religions, all nations, and all peoples.

This unique declaration clues us in to the unique identity and power of the baby in the manger. The rightful, exclusive position of Savior, Christ, and Lord belongs to Jesus. This is the true meaning of Christmas.

DOING

Reject the alternatives

Besides Christianity, there are four predominant worldviews that compete for allegiance:

1. *Atheism* declares that there is no God. The inevitable conclusion of atheism is that we're here for no purpose. When you die, there is nothing awaiting you. Atheism is emotionally deadly. If you come from no one, are here for no reason, and when you die you go nowhere, then there is no hope for this life or eternal life.

2. *Deism* is the belief that God exists, but he is distant. He basically made the world and then left. Playing the devil in a movie, Al Pacino once said that God was an “absentee landlord.” He doesn’t pay any attention to you or the world, and he is certainly not becoming a man and entering into history to suffer or serve. You are on your own.
3. *Pantheism and panentheism* are similar. Pantheism is the belief that everything is God. Panentheism is the belief that God is in everything, like a force or energy. Good and evil essentially don’t exist, because they are two sides of the same coin, yin and yang. The problem is that there is no justice. When we suffer and we see injustice or evil on the earth, where’s the justice? The answer in pantheism and panentheism is — there isn’t any justice. There’s no judge outside of this system. All we have is what is, and good and evil are different sides of the same coin. It’s all one. So if you’re hurt, damaged, raped, abused, abandoned, or betrayed, you can’t really say that was wrong. All you can say is, that happened. You can’t appeal to any sovereign God separate from the world for help, because there’s no one beyond creation. You have no hope of final judgment in the end.
4. *Theism* allows for the existence of God, but this existence can range from the one god of monotheism (Judaism, Islam) to the many gods of polytheism (Mormonism, Hinduism). Most theistic worldviews acknowledge the difference between the creator and the created, but there is no savior. Instead, we have to save ourselves through religion and good works. The result is that we either keep the rules and get very proud of ourselves and judgmental of others, or we fail to keep the rules and fall into despair. In this way meager religious works seek to close the infinite gap between sinners and the divine.
5. *Christianity* is about the one true God who is separate from his creation but enters into his creation as the God-man Jesus Christ. This is where Christianity is different. There is a God, he has not abandoned us, he is separate from his creation, and he has come on a rescue mission for us in love. We come from God, we belong to God, and we’re here for God and find our joy in living for his glory. God is here with us to this day through the Holy Spirit, and one day we will stand before God and experience a perfect eternity with him, where sin and all of its effects are no more, if we turn from sin and trust in him.

Receive the good news

“Fear not,” the angel said, “for behold, I bring *you* good news of great joy” (Luke 2:10a, emphasis added). The good news of Jesus is personal; in speaking to the shepherds, the angel addresses it to “you.” Christianity is not only a world religion or a worldview; it’s the life-changing, soul-saving, eternity-altering truth about Jesus Christ. The gospel is rooted in historical facts, but it’s much more than interesting, inspiring information. The birth of Jesus has huge, real implications for life—your

life, my life, and “all the people” (Luke 2:10b). Everyone needs to hear that a savior has come, he is for them, and he loves them.

What we think of Jesus determines how we live, how we suffer, and ultimately how we die. Jesus does not guarantee that all will be well for us in this life. But what if we know that we belong to God, and we know that everything will be okay in the end. We’re here for God. We’re known by God. We’re loved by God. If we belong to Jesus, God is present with us. He changes us. He can identify and comfort us in our suffering because he has suffered. And when we die, he’ll be there. We’ll see him face to face, and he’ll wipe all the tears from our eyes.

The atheist must justify his or her existence within a cold, empty universe governed by the survival of the fittest. The deist must reconcile the fact that God exists but either doesn’t care or doesn’t have the power to address the suffering in our world. The panentheist and pantheist cannot rightly condemn evil, since everything is tied together as one. The imperfect theist must strive to do the impossible and please the perfect demands of God.

Christianity offers the hope of good news: a savior has been born, named Christ the Lord. We have a real need and a real savior who ALONE can really save.

Respond with joy

In hearing about the birth of Jesus, here’s what the angels do: “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’” (Luke 2:13-14) Angels dwell eternally in the presence of God, singing of his goodness and grace. When they discover that the long-awaited promises have at last been fulfilled, they celebrate.

None of this jubilation is lost on Mary. She “treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). She has sung previously in the book, but here she’s simply overwhelmed. Perhaps it dawned on her that the savior, the rescuer, the hero, the deliverer, the dragon slayer, the kingdom giver is there in her presence. Immanuel is there with her, in her arms, and he is her son. Her heart overflows with quiet joy.

The shepherds depart from the scene “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen” (Luke 2:20). The savior is here, hope for the world has arrived, and they’ve looked upon his face. They sing and celebrate with gladness and joy because Jesus is good news.

The good news of Jesus is for all people, including us. And our response should be to ponder this gift

in our hearts, like Mary, and sing with our mouths like the angels and the shepherds. Glory to God in the highest!

PRAYING

- No matter how many times you have heard it, there is always something to appreciate about the Christmas story. What is the Holy Spirit teaching you this time around?
- How would you describe your worldview? Where do you find hope in the face of great pain and suffering?
- If you're a Christian, what are some practical ways that the good news of Jesus influenced and changed your life?
- How can you respond joyfully to the good news about Jesus?

Chapter 9: The Temple

READING

Luke 2:22-39

Jesus Presented at the Temple

And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

*“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”*

And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The Return to Nazareth

And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

LEARNING

Have you ever sat in church and seen a beaming couple stand up front and dedicate their chubby little blessing to the Lord? Something like that happened to the baby Jesus.

According to the customs prescribed in the Old Testament, Mary and Joseph brought their son, Jesus, to the temple in Jerusalem to be dedicated. The child was still very young at the time, perhaps about six weeks old or so.

As part of the journey, at the base of the temple there would have been places for ceremonial cleansing and washing, all foreshadowing work that Jesus would eventually accomplish on the cross, cleansing us from unrighteousness and washing away our sins. To show that they desired this atoning sacrifice, pilgrims to Jerusalem would wear white. They would not talk about “going” to the temple but “ascending” to the temple. As they were physically climbing the steps, spiritually they were to lift their soul in praise and adoration and thanksgiving to God. Often, they would even sing the Psalms of ascent in the Bible meant for pilgrims as they went to meet with God.

This is the process that Joseph and Mary undertook with their newborn child. They would have been traveling from Nazareth to Jerusalem, about 140 miles. This would have taken them roughly one week, so we know that this is a very serious, devout family that greatly loves God. Luke tells us that they did “according to what is said in the Law of the Lord” (Luke 2:24). When this phrase appears in Luke it emphasizes a deep devotion to God.

Two patient prophets

Once in Jerusalem, Joseph and Mary met a man named Simeon who loved God. The Holy Spirit had confirmed to Simeon that he was alive during a strategic moment in history and “would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (Luke 2:26). Simeon was waiting to meet the anointed one, the Messiah.

A reading of Luke reveals that he is emphatic to repeatedly teach us about the Holy Spirit. Luke shows that Jesus was revealed by prophecy through the Holy Spirit, that Jesus was filled and led by the Holy Spirit, that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in his baptism, enabling and empowering and

encouraging his ministry. He is very keen to remind us continually of the work of the Holy Spirit; through what we would consider natural events, those providential moments where God brings people, circumstances, and things together; and through more obvious, supernatural moments where miracles, prophecies, revelations, the combating with demons, and those types of activities occur.

Simeon has this revelation from the Holy Spirit. He has a prophecy. “And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and he blessed God and said ‘Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel’” (Luke 2:27-32).

At last, the day Simeon waited for had arrived. He held the child, praised God, and prophesied. “[My] eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,” Simeon declared, “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:30-32). God loves the Jews. God loves the Gentiles. Jesus came to save “all peoples,” every language, tribe, tongue, nation, culture, background, and sub-culture.

Simeon goes on to predict the more painful aspects of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus would be a man at the center of extraordinary controversy, conflict, acrimony, and strife. History itself is divided into B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (*anno Domini*, the year of our Lord) around this man, Jesus, as he literally divides history and many in it. Just as Simeon said, to this day Jesus is still incredibly divisive. He remains a point of unity for those who love him, and disunity for those who do not.

Joseph and Mary encounter another prophecy during their trip to Jerusalem from Anna, a prophetess, who also praised God for the opportunity to witness “the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38). After these powerful encounters with the Spirit of God, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus completed their ceremonies and started home again for Nazareth.

Jesus and the temple

Jesus’ visit to the temple represented a new epoch in human history. When Jesus and the temple come together, we see the fulfillment of the Old Covenant and the inauguration of the New Covenant taking place. Let me explain to you some of the theological significance of the temple, and that moment when Jesus arrived.

1. The temple was the connecting place between heaven and earth.

The temple, particularly the Holy of Holies in the center of the temple, was the connection place

between heaven and earth. God is in heaven as Creator, we are on earth as created, and God's very presence dwelt in the temple, in the Holy of Holies, making it the most sacred place on earth.

2. The temple was the place of God's presence.

In the Old Testament, if you wanted to be near God, you had to go to the temple. Even then, however, only a select few could approach the Holy of Holies, and only after a rigorous series of ritual purifications.

3. The temple was where God's people would come to meet with him.

If you wanted to meet with God during the temple era, you had to visit the temple. God didn't need a house; he created the heavens and the earth. But he did establish a place where people could come and meet with him. And people came from long distances to visit Jerusalem and set eyes on the place containing God's very presence.

4. The temple was the place where sin was atoned for.

All of the ritual purifications and sacrifices done in and around the temple were performed to symbolize the remission of sin. At the temple, before a holy and righteous God, people would acknowledge their guilt and sin.

One day every year, on Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), the high priest was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies to make a sacrifice on behalf of the people. On that day, two goats would be brought, a substitute goat and a scapegoat. The priest would pray over the substitute goat, confess the sins of the people, and then slaughter the animal to atone for their sins. The priest would then pray over the scapegoat, confess the sins of the people, and then send it away to represent how God not only forgives sin but removes it completely.

5. The temple was the center of life and faith and worship.

God's people were surrounded by enemies on every side who frequently threatened and attacked. The temple was a place where God's people could unite and care for each other. If you enjoy community with God's people, worship with God's people, and live with God's people, then you have some idea what it meant to have heartfelt community cultivated through gatherings at the temple.

As we've discussed earlier in the book, 400 years before Jesus' birth, the prophet Malachi prophesied that the Messiah would come to the temple. When Mary holds Jesus tenderly in her arms, ascending the steps of the temple wearing white, she is fulfilling Malachi's words. She is holding in her hands the fulfillment of the entire sacrificial system, the entire point of the Day of Atonement, the entire purpose of the nation of Israel, the consideration of the priests, and the existence of the temple

itself.

The temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., just like Jesus said it would be (Matthew 26:61; Mark 14:58; John 2:19). The temple has been destroyed for almost 2,000 years. Why? We have no need of it any longer. It has served its purpose. For hundreds of years, the temple prepared people for the coming of Jesus. And then he came.

DOING

Enjoy the New Covenant

I have good news for you. We don't need ritual baths anymore; Jesus cleanses our hearts through repentance and faith. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

We don't need to go to the temple anymore. Where do we go to meet with God? Jesus. "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). Where is sin atoned for? Jesus. Where is the center of our life and our faith and our worship and our community? Jesus. No temple is required.

We do not have to bring a sacrifice to God any longer. Jesus has atoned for our sins. John the Baptizer said it well: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) Unlike the Day of Atonement, which took place year after year, Jesus' sacrifice was once and for all. "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified" (Hebrews 10:14).

There's no longer any high priest, because we don't need one. The high priest was the intercessor and the advocate for the people. He would go between the people and God. He would bring the people's sin to God and he would mediate and intercede. And the priesthood came to an end with Jesus. Why? Because he's our great high priest (Hebrews 4:15) who alone is our mediator between us and God.

Isn't that amazing? In antiquity, the high priest would live a separated life. He wasn't exposed to the temptations and the trials and the troubles that the average, common person was. But Jesus is a high priest who can sympathize. He's lived in obscurity and suffered. He's been beaten, spat upon, mocked, betrayed, disowned, abandoned, homeless, poor, broken, despised. There is a God, no matter what your circumstances, who relates to you so that you relate to him. Aren't you glad that Jesus is our high priest and mediator?!

If you have Jesus, you have everything that everyone in the Old Covenant longed for, hoped for, and

prayed for!

Give like Joseph and Mary

Luke tells us that the sacrifice Joseph and Mary brought to the temple was “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons” (Luke 2:24). This was not the standard sacrifice for the occasion, but it was permitted as an exception for the poor. Jesus’ mother and father, though devoted to God and devout in faith, could not afford a typical sacrifice. Ultimately, the size of our gift matters less than the heart behind it and the degree of sacrifice required to give it.

Pray over people

When Simeon met Jesus and his family, the Bible tells us that he blessed them, likely with a pastoral prayer (Luke 2:33). One of the great gifts of my life is to pray over people, including my wife and children, and demonstrably indicate God’s affection toward them. I like to picture Simeon as an elderly servant of God. In the moment when he sees the fulfillment of all his life’s expectation and Scriptures’ revelation, I see him placing a hand on Mary and praying for her—she has an enormous job to raise this child—and praying for his adoptive father, Joseph, to be a good father to this boy. It is a tremendous privilege to pray with people as God works in their lives. Who would appreciate you praying over them?

PRAYING

- Joseph and Mary took great pains to travel to Jerusalem, make a sacrifice, and dedicate Jesus at the temple. They did so out of loving obedience to God, not religious obligation. When it comes to giving, serving, and attending church, how is your heart?
- Reflect on the changes that resulted when Jesus replaced the temple and all of its rites. Take some time to enjoy the unrestricted access we have to the presence of God, and thank him for this great gift.
- Simeon and Anna rejoiced to witness God’s work in their day. Do you get excited about what Jesus is doing in the world around you as his kingdom continues to grow?
- Spend some time praying with someone, like Simeon did with Joseph and Mary.

Chapter 10: The Boy Who Was Lord

READING

Luke 2:40-52

And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

The Boy Jesus in the Temple

Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress." And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

LEARNING

As the father of two teenage boys, I often wonder what Jesus was like at their age. Was he an introvert or an extrovert? Was he a popular kid or more shy and reserved? Did he have a big laugh? How did he treat his younger siblings, especially when they were annoying him? How did he handle the awkward years of puberty?

The Bible tells us very little about these years of Jesus. In fact, Luke gives us one final glimpse of Jesus' childhood, and our only glimpse of what he was like as a boy.

We know very little about the early years of Jesus, before the beginning of his public ministry at roughly the age of thirty. Some call these “the lost years” of Jesus. Many cults and false teachers try to speculate as to what happened during this time. They’ll try to fill the gaps in, saying that he was with the Essenes or he went east to study with mystics. All of this is pure conjecture.

Pre-teen Jesus

All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable, and the Bible tells us everything we need to know, but perhaps not all we want to know about the life of Jesus. It may not seem like much information, but Luke 2:40 provides some indication of Jesus as a boy: “And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.” Luke 2:52 adds, “Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.” The Lord Jesus grew physically from boyhood through adolescence to manhood. He grew spiritually, studying the Scriptures, worshipping, and praying. He grew socially in favor; people respected him enough to call him a rabbi, even in his hometown.

It would seem that Jesus likely did not receive a formal education as a traditional rabbi, as a teacher. But in Nazareth there would have been a synagogue where perhaps dozens of people at a time would get together for prayers and readings. These were very simple, rural folk, many were likely illiterate. Jesus was literate, so he received some education somehow. All evidence suggests that Mary and Joseph did do a great job raising Jesus. They taught him, they loved him, they served him, they protected him, and they got him a great education.

Luke 2:41-52 tells the story of the boy Jesus, once again visiting the temple with his family. Though he was only 12 years old, Jesus was discussing theology with grown scholars who were amazed at his knowledge. He was very theologically astute and a very devoted student of Scripture. Not only that, but as we shall see he was also a boy of great courage and character.

In this same episode, Jesus’ parents lose track of him. Mary was absolutely terrified. Jerusalem had a population of around 100,000, and they’re used to Nazareth, a village of maybe around 100. Somewhere among the crowds, the caravans, and the conversations of the big city, Joseph and Mary realize they’ve lost God. Literally. That’s an especially bad day, but every parent can identify with that same horrible feeling of having a young child wander off.

Jesus’ mother and father began searching desperately, “in great distress” (Luke 2:48). They had brought Jesus to Jerusalem as a young man, perhaps gave him some freedom to roam, and then proceeded to lose him. They finally track him down in the temple, and his response is fascinating. “Why were you looking for me?” he asks, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

(Luke 2:49) The religious establishment treated the temple with unhealthy adoration. For Jesus, it was simply his dad's home. He wasn't there to look good or act religious. He just liked to hang out with God his Father.

A child of God

The other amazing part of this story is the fact that Jesus chose to obey his parents. Granted, unlike other children, he never sinned. But he had sinful parents. I know it's hard enough as a sinner to put up with sinful parents. Imagine being sinless with sinful parents. Yet Jesus honored them and obeyed them anyway.

Think about it: pre-teen Jesus is having a nice conversation with the seminary professors. Rather than sitting down to learn from the lesson, Jesus' parents want to drag him back to Nazareth. Instead of arguing like most kids, Jesus "went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them" (Luke 2:51a). He spent the ensuing years living as a normal child - doing his chores and homework. Children of all ages, take note: We're to honor and obey our parents whether they understand us or not. Jesus' parents didn't fully understand him, but he still submitted to them.

In doing so, Jesus was a blessing to his mom. "And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart," Luke reveals (Luke 2:51b). It is possible and right that children would be a blessing to their mom, and to their dad. The fifth commandment says, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." Do you want that? Do you want that for yourself? Do you want that for your children?

Jesus honored his parents, and as a result, the next verse tells us, he "increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52). Murdered at roughly the age of 33, Jesus' days were not especially long in the land, but he lived an incredibly fruitful life—because he honored and submitted to his heavenly Father (Matt. 26:39; Luke 23:46). "I glorified you on earth," Jesus said, "having accomplished the work that you gave me to do" (John 17:4). And he honored and obeyed his earthly parents as God commanded.

DOING

Honor your parents—including your heavenly Father

How did Jesus manage to endure life as a perfect child with imperfect parents? Like all other aspects of his ministry, Jesus submitted to his parents by the indwelling presence and power of the person of the Holy Spirit.

To be a good child (of God and of our parents) means to honor our heavenly Father and our earthly parents. In order to do this, we need a new nature, patterned after Jesus' perfect nature, filled by the same Holy Spirit's power as Jesus, to follow in the example of Jesus.

The Lord Jesus was the perfect, sinless, obedient, Spirit-filled child. He gives us his perfect obedience, he dies for our sin, and he rises and gives us a new nature and a new power to follow in his example.

How about you? Do you need to thank your parents? Do you need to apologize to your parents for your imperfections? Do you need to forgive your imperfect parents?

Teach kids to love the Lord

Our culture often expects far too little out of children. We entice them to accept folly, rebellion, and anarchy as a rite of passage. Jesus demonstrates a far better, wiser path. It is possible for young children to know the Lord, be filled with the Spirit, honor their father and mother, and grow in wisdom. Whether you have children of your own or not, you can still serve the little ones in your life (in your church, extended family) by encouraging them to trust and enjoy Jesus by following in his example at their age.

Become a child of God

If you're not a Christian, turn from sin and trust in Jesus. God is a Father, and you're a rebellious kid. The Bible says we are all "by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (Eph. 2:3). Rather than disowning us, however, God came as Jesus Christ. As our Big Brother, he lived this perfect life as the obedient child that we are not. He died to pay the price that we should have paid so that we could be freed, loved, forgiven, and adopted into the family of God. Give yourself to Jesus and you become a son or a daughter of God the Father, and join his forever family.

Jesus is for everyone

God became a man. What's astounding to remember, however, is that God also became a really little man. He became an unborn baby. He became an infant. He became a kid. He became a teenager. I would have skipped junior high and started in my twenties, at least. God experienced it all.

Jesus isn't just for grown people. Jesus is for all people. Whether you're a child, an adolescent, or an adult—whatever stage of life you're in—we can all look to Jesus and know that he has been there. He is our compassionate high priest who listens to us, suffered for us, forgives us, leads us, and reminds us that we have eternal hope, joy, and love, so long as we stick with him: God with us.

PRAYING

- What does honoring your parents look like in your particular stage of life? Do you need to apologize to them? Thank them? Speak more respectfully of or to them? Or simply obey them?
- Pray for the children in your life, that they would grow in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man, like Jesus.
- Do you understand and truly believe that God is a Father who deeply loves you and longs to help you?
- In what areas of your life is God the Father currently seeking to mature you?

Notes

- [1] J.C. Ryle, *Luke: Crossway Classic Commentaries*, Eds. Alister McGrath and J.I. Packer (Wheaton, IL: 1997), 17.
- [2] Just, A. A. (Ed.). (2005). *Luke* (p. 4). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- [3] See especially W.K. Hobart, *The Medical Language of St. Luke* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, 1882), and also Adolf von Harnack, *Luke the Physician* (New York: Putnam, 1907).
- [4] “Anti-Marcionite Prologue to Luke,” as cited on http://www.ccel.org/p/pearse/morefathers/anti_marcionite_prologues.htm, (accessed April 27, 2009).
- [5] I. Howard Marshall, “Luke,” in D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed., (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 703.
- [6] Quoted from *Luke the Historian*, by John A. Thompson, (1974). *Bible and Spade (1974)*, 3(1), 7.