

LESSON 1

THE BIRTH OF JOHN AND THE BIRTH OF JESUS

As we begin our study of the life of Jesus, we must include a number of things to have a clear picture of what happened. We need to look at prophecies, the writer from which we are reading, definitions of words, and historical information to help us understand the things that surround the events in the life of Jesus.

We will begin with some background on Luke. He was a Gentile. He would have been educated in the Greek way of life, and he was a physician. Being a doctor, he gives special attention to the healing ministry of Jesus. He stresses the compassion of Christ.

In chapter 4 of Luke, he traces Jesus' heritage back to Seth, the son of Adam. Matthew, who wrote to the Jews, stopped with Abraham. This is not significant except to say that it was important to the people to whom they were writing at that time.

Matthew gives us more detail about the birth of Jesus, and we will talk about some of that as we study.

The book of Luke opens with Zacharias serving the people in the office of priest. His particular job was to burn incense. Remember that only Levites could be priests. Each priest belonged to a certain order, and Zacharias' order was Abia or Abijah (Second Chronicles 24). King David had divided the priests into orders because some of them were not getting to serve a turn in worship. The sons of Aaron were Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. They were priests after Aaron. Remember that Nadab and Abihu had been destroyed because they offered strange fire (Leviticus 10:2). They had no children, so the responsibility of the priesthood fell to Eleazar and Ithamar. There were twice as many in the family of Eleazar as in the family of Ithamar, and this caused a problem. So, David divided them and assigned them to certain orders; and they rotated through in the way David assigned them. This way, every priest had a chance to serve.

Just a note to be considered—if you trace back the orders, you can figure about the time Zacharias was serving. It is a complicated study based on the Jewish months, but it most certainly shows that Jesus was not born in December.

Zacharias and Elizabeth were considered to be righteous people. They followed all of God's commandments and His ordinances (Luke 1:6). They were considered to be blameless. This description tells us the reason they were chosen to parent the forerunner of the promised Messiah.

As Zacharias was burning the incense, he was visited by an angel. This angel is named, one of only two names in the Bible given for angels. Gabriel appeared to Zacharias, and immediately the priest was afraid. The angel assured him that God had sent him in response to a prayer. He delivered the news that this aged couple would have a son, and they were to call him John. The angel tells him that they will be happy about the birth of this child; that he would be great in God's sight; that he was not to drink wine nor strong drink; and he would be filled with the Holy Ghost. This child would also turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord. Gabriel even told Zacharias that John would be like Elijah.

Now Zacharias is probably overwhelmed by this message, and he appears to be a little skeptical of what the angel has told him. So, he asked him how he can know that what he says is true. The angel seems a little aggravated with him (verse 20) and tells him he will not be able to speak until the child is born.

When the angel left Zacharias, he went out to the people and could not speak. The people were convinced he had seen a vision. Zacharias stayed in the temple until he fulfilled his priestly duties and then returned to his house. In time, Elizabeth discovered that she would have a child. For five months she hid herself. This could have been for several reasons. She might have wanted to be sure she was really going to carry this child. She might have been a little uncomfortable because she was old. She might also have wanted to prepare herself for this birth, planning how she would train this child who would be so special.

When she was in her sixth month, Gabriel made a visit to another city and to a young woman. God sent this angel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee where Mary lived. Mary was engaged to a man named Joseph who was from the lineage of David. She was a virgin, favored by God, and chosen to carry and deliver God's Son.

The angel tells her that the Lord is with her. She was troubled by what the angel said and wondering just what he meant. Then he delivers a more disturbing message. This young woman is told that she is going to have a child. The angel tells her that she is to call His name Jesus. Like the description given to Elizabeth, Mary is given a description of her child. He will be great and called the Son of the

Most High. He will be given the throne of David, reign over the house of Jacob, and His kingdom will never end.

We cannot imagine how it would feel to receive a visit from an angel. I think I would be terrified, and Mary may have felt that way too. She seems to be mostly confused because she asks, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel explains that the Holy Spirit will come on her. This child will not come from the seed of man.

The angel then informs Mary that Elizabeth has conceived and will also have a son. She is in her sixth month. Mary declares her faith in God, and says let all of this happens as she has been told.

We need to understand that Joseph and Mary were not married. They were in what we would call the engagement period. Joseph would have had every right according to Jewish law to put her away. He could have been released from his promise to marry her. We need to go to the book of Matthew to see what Joseph’s reaction was. Joseph is called her husband in verse 19, but notice that verse 18 says they had not come together. There had been no sexual union. He would have made a public declaration of her having sinned, but he didn’t want to draw public attention to the fact that she was pregnant and unmarried. He decided he would do whatever he could to end this relationship quietly.

While Joseph is considering what he needs to do, he is visited by an angel. We are not told if this was Gabriel or some other angel, but we know that the angel appeared in a dream and not in person. The angel calls Joseph by name and instructs him not to be afraid to marry Mary. He also said that Mary would have a son, and they were to call Him Jesus. He would save His people from their sins. The angel also quotes Isaiah 7:14, the promise of the coming of the Messiah.

Joseph awoke from sleep, and he did what the angel told him to do. He proceeded with the marriage, but they did not consummate their marriage until after the child was born (Matthew 1:25).

We need to go back to Luke 1 to finish our pre-birth stories. Mary decided to make a trip to see Elizabeth. When she walked in the door of Elizabeth’s house, Elizabeth felt the child she was carrying jump inside her. Elizabeth and Mary seem to understand that the babies they are carrying are destined to lives of greatness; and they celebrate this time together, sharing what only two women in such circumstances can share.

Three months or so after the visit from Mary, Elizabeth gives birth to a son. Deaf and dumb, Zacharias stands before the people on the eighth day to circumcise his son. Their friends and relatives are ready to have him name the child, expecting the child will be named after his father. However, Zacharias writes on a tablet that his name is to be John. Everyone is confused because none of the relatives have the name, John. Immediately after this, Zacharias is able to speak, and his first words are spoken in a blessing to God. John grew to become strong, and Luke says he lived in the wilderness until he appeared to the people of Israel.

As if Mary and Joseph had not had enough excitement in their lives, The emperor, Caesar Augustus, sent out orders that there would be a tax imposed on all those under his rule. Each family had to go to the birthplace of the head of the family. Joseph prepared to make the trip from Nazareth in the northern part of the country to Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David. Luke 2 says that while they were there, Mary gave birth to their son. He was placed in a manger, or a feeding trough for animals. Shepherds came to visit, led by an angel of the Lord. After their visit they returned to the fields and their sheep.

Notice some things we do not find in the story of the birth of Jesus. There is nothing about an innkeeper turning them away. The shepherds were the only ones who visited at the birth. The animals did not talk. Angels did not sing, but rather spoke. Wise men did not visit Jesus at the birth. They visited later and at a different place.

FOR DISCUSSION: WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THIS LESSON?

1. It is important to know exactly what the Scripture says regarding any subject. There is much misinformation about the birth of Jesus. Why is it important to teach only what the Bible says?
2. Why were Elizabeth and Mary specifically chosen to bear sons who would be so important? Look specifically at the passages that describe each of the women.
3. Why is it important to trace the ancestors of Jesus?
4. What Old Testament laws were these families obeying in this lesson?