

GOD'S CHRISTMAS GIFT

Part 1

Did you go shopping on Black Friday? It is amazing to us that so many people would spend the night in front of stores or get up to flood the stores as early as 3 or 4 a.m. just to get a bargain and a head-start on their Christmas shopping. They seemed so full of excitement and enthusiasm to see how much money they could "save" (i.e., spend) for Christmas gifts. I wonder how many of those people ever stopped to think about the real "*reason for the season*" and what the best Christmas Gift is.

Today begins the Advent season, as we have been reminded by the lighting of the Advent candle. Advent actually means "*coming*." So while many will spend the next couple of weeks shopping and decorating, the season is really all about the first coming of the Lord Jesus to the earth.

The birth of our Lord took place at the time and place predicted by many of the prophets. The first clear reference to Jesus' birth goes all the way back in **Genesis 49:10**: "*The scepter (a staff or baton borne by a sovereign as an emblem of authority) shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh (Messiah; Jesus) comes, and to Him shall be the obedience of the peoples.*"

Other verses include the following:

Isaiah 7:14 NLT:

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel (God with us; Jesus)."

Micah 5:2 NAS:

"But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days."

Haggai 2:6-9 (ESV):

⁶ *For thus says the Lord of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land.*

⁷ *And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts.*

⁸ *The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts.*

⁹ *The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts.' "*

Somewhere between 6 and 4 B.C. Joseph and Mary were led to go to Bethlehem, and it is there that Christ was born. The precise year is in question.

The best calculation we have heard is 6 B.C. We know, however, that it took place in the “*fullness of the time*” according to **Galatians 4:4**: “*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law.*”

This verse simply means that at just the right time in the world's history, when all conditions were just right for the gospel to spread throughout the world, God sent Jesus to proclaim the gospel message, the “*Good News*” of salvation for all the world.

The story begins with the news about the birth of the one that was to precede Jesus. God clearly announced John the Baptist's function at his birth so there could be no mistaking that he was the Messiah's forerunner as prophesied particularly by Micah in the passage we just read from Micah 5:2. This demonstrates how thoroughly God had prepared His preordained plan for sin's defeat. Let us go back to that time from 6 to 4 B.C. and get a firsthand look at what is the greatest story ever told. There used to be a television program back in the 1950's called “*You are There.*” Well, close your eyes if you'd like and just imagine that you are there, and are about to participate in history's most significant event. Our story will begin in Luke 1, verse 5.

Luke 1:5-25 The Message:

“During the rule of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest assigned service in the regiment of Abijah. His name was Zacharias. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron. Her name was Elizabeth. Together they lived honorably before God, careful in keeping to the ways of the commandments and enjoying a clear conscience before God. But they were childless because Elizabeth could never conceive, and now they were quite old. It so happened that as Zacharias was carrying out his priestly duties before God, working the shift assigned to his regiment, it came his one turn in life to enter the sanctuary of God and burn incense.

“The congregation was gathered and praying outside the Temple at the hour of the incense offering. Unannounced, an angel of God appeared just to the right of the altar of incense. Zacharias was paralyzed in fear. But the angel reassured him, ‘Don't fear, Zacharias. Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bear a son by you. You are to name him John. You're going to leap like a gazelle for joy, and not only you—many will delight in his birth. He'll achieve great stature with God. He'll drink neither wine nor beer. He'll be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment he leaves his mother's womb. He will turn many sons and daughters of Israel back to their God. He will herald God's arrival in the style and strength of Elijah, soften the hearts of parents to children, and

kindle devout understanding among hardened skeptics—he'll get the people ready for God.'

*Zacharias said to the angel, 'Do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman.' But the angel said, 'I am **Gabriel**, the sentinel of God, sent especially to bring you this glad news. But because you won't believe me, you'll be unable to say a word until the day of your son's birth. Every word I've spoken to you will come true on time—God's time.' Meanwhile, the congregation waiting for Zacharias was getting restless, wondering what was keeping him so long in the sanctuary. When he came out and couldn't speak, they knew he had seen a vision. He continued speechless and had to use sign language with the people. When the course of his priestly assignment was completed, he went back home. It wasn't long before his wife, Elizabeth, conceived. She went off by herself for five months, relishing her pregnancy. 'So, this is how God acts to remedy my unfortunate condition!' she said.*

Gabriel is only named four times in Scripture (Daniel 8:16; 9:21; Luke 1:19, 26), and each time he speaks of the coming of our Lord. He is an angel who stands in the presence of God, as was stated in verse 19, one who brings instruction directly from God. To put it in clearly understandable terms, Gabriel is God's top lieutenant. The news Gabriel brought to Zacharias must be studied carefully, for it revealed that John was to come "*in the spirit and power*" of Elijah (v.17; he was not to be Elijah reincarnate), and that his function would be to prepare Israel for its Messiah.

John was to be a Nazarite according to verse 15. A Nazarite was a very special commissioning by God and was rarely granted. If you'd like a detailed description of a Nazarite you can find it in Numbers 6. Scripture reports only two other men with this distinction, Samson and Samuel, and both were chosen to contribute towards the salvation of Israel. We should all take note that Luke 1:17 one of the consequences of a people turning to God is the restoration of family relationships, and the subjection of those who obstinately reject the will of God. Many wonderful things were happening to Zacharias, yet he didn't believe Gabriel according to verse 18. Verse 18 could be paraphrased, "*Prove it*"; that is why Zacharias was punished by being struck dumb—he was reluctant to believe God's word.

The Jews had a deep dread of entering God's presence, for they feared that to do so unworthily could result in being struck dead (Leviticus 10:1–3). So we can surmise that some in the crowd were apprehensive at Zacharias' delay, fearing that he had been struck dead and that at any moment fire would flash from the Holy Place and consume them as described in Numbers 16:21, or that the earth would open and swallow them as it had Korah and his supporters in Numbers 16:32. We can imagine their relief when eventually Zacharias emerged, and their astonishment when they realized he had seen a vision. Remember that Israel had been without a prophet for four centuries prior to this event. God had been silent for four hundred years. Now God had again, at last, communicated

with His people in His temple. Surely, they should have realized that something major was about to happen. Maybe that expectation survived for thirty years until John began his ministry, which explains in part his ministry's rapid success.

The Jews regarded being childless as a sign of divine displeasure, and therefore as a sign that God rejected or disapproved of them. How typical. How often we think God must be displeased with us because things aren't going the way we want, yet in reality He has more magnificent things in store for us. Elizabeth thought that God disapproved of her, but God declared her blameless in verse 6 and had a unique blessing and privilege in store for her. How wrong we can be about how God feels about us.

The miraculous nature of this conception becomes more vivid when one knows that the Jews of Zacharias' day customarily reserved the term "*old man*" for those over sixty years of age; so verse 18 makes us realize just how old Zacharias and Elizabeth were. They could have been great-grandparents when they became parents for the first time! Imagine Elizabeth's surprise when she, like her ancestress, Sarah, Abraham's wife, found herself pregnant when she was past childbearing age. Sarah was ninety when she became pregnant with Isaac.

Some weeks would have passed before she hid herself in a mixture of embarrassment, wonder and joy. It seems likely she went into seclusion from the time she knew she was pregnant. It is significant that God chose a righteous couple to be the parents of His messenger as we read in verse 6. God reserves this sort of honor for people who are close to Him and who will actively pursue His will. Elizabeth thought God was taking away His disapproval of her in verse 25, when indeed, He was showering her with honor!

John's conception so late in his mother's marriage and life is remarkably parallel to Isaac's. Sarah was well past childbearing and had long been married to Abraham before she miraculously conceived. Secondly, the hill country of Israel centers on Hebron where Sarah received news of her supernatural conception two thousand years earlier. Spiritually sensitive Jews, pondering Elizabeth's miracle, would quickly note she was living in the same area where Sarah had lived when she, too, received news of bearing a baby long beyond the time women are capable of having children. The similarities would surely have impressed on them that John must be as exceptional and special as Isaac. They must have wondered just what great things God had in store for Israel for Him to be duplicating this special event. These similarities highlight the perfection of God's plan and the impact of John's birth on the people of the hill country of Judea.

Meanwhile in a town about 120 miles to the north, another story was unfolding, and that story is told in Luke 1:26-56.

Luke 1:26-56 The Message:

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her: 'Good

morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty, Beautiful inside and out! God be with you.' She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, 'Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus. He will be great and be called "Son of the Highest." The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David; He will rule Jacob's house forever— no end, ever, to his kingdom.'

Mary said to the angel, 'But how? I've never slept with a man.' The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Highest will hover over you; Therefore, the child you bring to birth will be called Holy, Son of God. And did you know that your cousin Elizabeth conceived a son, old as she is? Everyone called her barren, and here she is six months pregnant! Nothing, you see, is impossible with God.' And Mary said, 'Yes, I see it all now: I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say.' Then the angel left her.

Mary didn't waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zacharias' house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly, 'You're so blessed among women, and the babe in your womb is also blessed! And why am I so blessed that the mother of my Lord visits me? The moment the sound of your greeting entered my ears, The babe in my womb skipped like a lamb for sheer joy. Blessed woman, who believed what God said, believed every word would come true!'

And Mary said, 'I'm bursting with good news; I'm dancing the song of my Savior God. God took one good look at me, and look what happened— I'm the most fortunate woman on earth! What God has done for me will never be forgotten, the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others. His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him. He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts. He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud. The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold. He embraced his chosen child, Israel; he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high. It's exactly what he promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now.' Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months and then went back to her own home.'"

This brief passage records one of the most astounding displays of confidence in God, absolute devotion to Him, and sheer bravery in the entire Bible. Mary was probably a

teenager around fifteen years old when this event occurred, for that is when girls customarily became engaged in her day. She would have been experiencing all the excitement of a young woman about to be married. Then, suddenly, without any warning, an angel appeared to her and shattered all her dreams. She found herself being asked to mother a child out of wedlock, a shameful experience for a young woman to carry through life. This could ruin her chances of marriage to Joseph; at worst, it could end in a shameful and horrible death by stoning (Deuteronomy 22:20–21).

Verse 27 could suggest that Mary was descended from David, though it could also refer to Joseph. However, verse 32 talks of Jesus as the son of David before Joseph had adopted Him as his son, so this suggests strongly that Mary was herself of David's line. Luke 1:69 says a horn of salvation *has* (past tense) been raised up in David's house before Joseph had married Mary. So Mary was the only person through whom the as-yet-unborn Savior could be descended from David, for legal adoption had yet to take place. Scripture thus gives us all the evidence necessary to establish that Mary was of Davidic lineage.

The Gospels repeatedly refer to the Jewish betrothal, so we need to understand it clearly, for to regard it as similar to our Western engagement process is to misunderstand it. Jewish betrothal involved a legal contract that had the force of marriage. It was closer to our wedding than to our engagement. If the betrothed husband were to die, the betrothed woman became a widow and could avail herself of the legal status of a wife. If she was unfaithful she was divorced as an adulteress; and betrothal could only be terminated by divorce proceedings. In other words, she had the full legal standing of a wife, but the marriage was only consummated after the actual wedding which traditionally took place a year after the engagement. Deuteronomy 22:21, calls for the stoning of a girl found having sex with a man who is not her husband and helps us appreciate the seriousness of Mary's dilemma and the gutsy bravery of her sacrificial dedication to God's purposes.

As we said earlier Gabriel only made four appearances. When he appeared to Daniel his appearance was such that it terrified Daniel. We've seen Zacharias' reaction and now Gabriel is appearing to Mary. He was no mere angel and was probably glowing with the reflected glory of God. No wonder Mary was greatly troubled.

Mary's awe and amazement must have been boundless when she was told that she would be the mother of the Messiah, for she would have understood the proclamation of verses 32 and 33 in Luke 1 as a clear statement of the identity of the Son she was yet to conceive.

The sixth month of verse 26 is the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy as verse 37 clarifies. News of Elizabeth's pregnancy was given to Mary as a confirming sign of the incredible event which was to happen to her, for it was as impossible in human understanding as Sarah's pregnancy two thousand years earlier (Gen 18:14). So if God had performed Elizabeth's miracle in a *'dead'* womb, why could He not also perform the miracle of a virgin birth?

Note how Mary's virginity is stressed by repeated statements in verse 27 and by specific definition in verse 34. The Greek word '*parthenos*' used in verse 27 unmistakably means '*virgin*'. It clearly refers to the attribute of chastity. Further, verse 35 states that Mary's son will be the Son of God and that conception would be by the Holy Spirit. There can be no doubt whatever that Scripture emphatically denies any human male involvement in the conception of Jesus; there is no doubt that the New Testament specifically teaches the virgin birth. We also see in verse 35 that all three persons of the Trinity are involved in the incarnation—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Gospels repeatedly emphasize involvement of all the Persons of the Trinity in Jesus' earthly ministry.

Mary's acceptance in verse 38 was a marvelous act of faith and submission; she risked slander, a loss of status, her betrothal to Joseph, and even the very real prospect of a disgraceful and horrible death (Deuteronomy 22:13–21 and John 8:5, 7). The risks and sacrifices she made were very real, and we, the whole human race, are indebted to her. Anti-Catholic sentiment causes us to downplay Mary's role, but in so doing we lose sight of a wonderful lesson of the self-sacrifice which she as a human being was prepared to endure so that the world might have its Savior. Zacharias and Elizabeth happily suffered embarrassment for this same cause. Mary's faith in God's ability to pull this all off demonstrates that she was not only already a woman dedicated to God, but the very best of women. If you were God, wouldn't you select the very best mom available to trust with the care of your child as he was growing up?

Mary was excited about the prospect of becoming the Messiah's mother and wasted no time in going to Elizabeth to confirm the angel's promise as told in verse 39. We can understand her hasty departure from Nazareth, for she must have longed to discuss her incredible news with someone, and Elizabeth was the only one likely to believe her. But how did she arrange to leave her parents and the man to whom she was engaged, Joseph? It's possible she told them that she had seen an angel in a vision who had revealed that her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant and persuaded them that she should nurse the aged Elizabeth through her pregnancy. Maybe she hinted that there was more to her vision which she would disclose on her return.

We believe we can reach such a conclusion because of the many clues we're given in the first chapter of Luke. Elizabeth's pregnancy was a secret. So Mary's parents would have been curious to find out if such an old man and woman (maybe in their seventies or eighties) could actually be having a baby. Mary knew that Elizabeth was in her sixth month. After Elizabeth's baby was born, Mary could go back home having proof that an angel had appeared to her in a vision announcing Elizabeth's pregnancy. Then they would probably believe her when she told them that the angel also told her that she was going to give birth to the Messiah without having had sexual relations with a man. This is pure speculation of course, as Scripture is silent about the details, but there must have been some method in Mary's reasoning to explain why she was going to visit Elizabeth.

Mary's journey was a considerable undertaking, for she traveled from Nazareth to the hill country south of Jerusalem. Her route would probably have been down the Jordan Valley to Jericho, then up the steep ascent to Jerusalem, then past Bethlehem to the hill

country—all told, a distance of one hundred and twenty miles on foot over very difficult mountainous terrain. We know nothing of the incidents of that journey; we do know, however, that Mary was destined to repeat all but fifteen miles of it less than nine months later.

The confirmation Mary sought was quick in coming, for Elizabeth's obvious pregnancy (she was *in* her sixth month) confirmed to Mary what the angel had told her. Added to this, Elizabeth's hymn of praise for her must have left Mary in a state of wonder and awe. Before Mary could even share her secret with Elizabeth, the Holy Spirit revealed it to Elizabeth (verse 41), and Elizabeth's expression of joy must have confirmed to Mary all that the angel Gabriel told her. God had provided Mary with someone to comfort and support her during the initial stages of her pregnancy. God thinks of everything and takes perfect care of those willing to live in obedience to His will!

Elizabeth's initial response at seeing Mary was a prophecy inspired by the Holy Spirit (verse 41) and the active movement in her womb. The Greek word here suggests that John leaped in her womb for joy at hearing his Messiah's mother's voice! In verse 15, God had promised Zacharias that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb; here was the fulfillment. The unborn baby's response and Elizabeth's prophecy clearly establish the superiority of the Son that Mary was carrying over even the God-given, miraculous son within Elizabeth's womb. So even before their births Elizabeth recognized Jesus' supremacy over John, for when a mother of a special child (triple special—by miraculous birth, by angelic announcement, and by a Nazarite vow) says that her son will serve another, that surely must be the strongest human testimony of the spiritual supremacy of the One over the other!

Elizabeth prophesied under the influence of the Holy Spirit beginning in verse 41. Her statement that Mary is a believer is a God-given assessment. Mary was a godly woman before Jesus was even conceived. Faith has always been the means of salvation even in Old Testament times as taught in Genesis 15:6 and Hebrews 11; that's why Mary could say that she *had* rejoiced in the Lord (verse 47). Again, we see that God uses righteous people for His purposes!

Mary's Magnificat, means "*glorification of God.*" Beginning in verse 46, Mary responds to Elizabeth's greeting. This statement by Mary is one of praise to God in verses 46–50, and prophecy in verses 51–55. Verse 50 is a transition and thus fits either division. Consider, too, Mary's use of Scripture. Between verses 46 and 55, Mary makes no less than a dozen references to Old Testament Scripture. For example:

- ★ verses 46, 48, 51 refer to 1 Sam 2:1–10, echoing Hannah's song exalting the Lord and speaking of what He can do.
- ★ Verse 48 uses 1 Samuel 1:11, expressing humility .
- ★ Verse 50 echoes Psalm 103:17 and Psalm 145:4.
- ★ Verse 51 speaks of God's mighty arm as do Psalm 89:10 and Psalm 98:1.
- ★ Verse 52 reiterates the thought in Job 5:11 and 12:19.
- ★ Verse 53 refers to Psalm 107:9, which speaks of God satisfying the hungry heart.

- ★ Verse 54 and Isaiah 41:8, 9 speak of God's mercy to Israel.
- ★ And verse 55 remembers the Abrahamic covenant referred to in Genesis 17:7 and Micah 7:20.

While we could build a whole sermon around this Magnificat and its connection to the Old Testament, let us merely state that this praise hymn of Mary's is particularly significant, for it displays a depth of understanding and knowledge of Scripture which commends Mary as a godly young woman. Clearly, she not only had great faith but backed it up with a thorough working knowledge of Old Testament scripture

Mary's praise starts with the fact that God is her Savior (verse 47), and she patently recognizes her pregnancy as a blessing conferred by God (verses 46–49). Her praise is patterned on Hannah's, found in 1 Samuel 2:1–10. The Greek verb translated '*blessed*' in verse 48 is used only twice in the New Testament, here and James 5:11 (where the KJV translates it 'count them happy').

Mary then made an easy, smooth transition from personal praise to prophecy, seeing blessing for generations into the future, opportunity for the oppressed, and fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant, promises God made to Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation (verses 50–55).

The developments we have discussed in Luke 1 are indeed remarkable. For four centuries God had not spoken to His people and there had not been a prophet since Malachi. Now, within the space of seven months, the angel Gabriel had appeared twice, just as often as he is recorded as appearing in the entire Old Testament. Furthermore, Gabriel's two Old Testament appearances brought revelation about the Messiah, his last one serving notice of the actual timing of the Messiah's advent (Daniel 9:25). Now, he came to announce that advent!

For four centuries there had been no God-given signs. Now Zacharias was struck silent while offering the incense that symbolized God had heard the prayers of the faithful (their most frequent prayer was for the Messiah's advent, or coming). But, added to this, two women had prophesied within a matter of minutes and only five women are called prophetesses in the entire Old Testament: Moses' sister Miriam (Exodus 15:20); Deborah, the judge (Judges 4:4); an unnamed woman in Isaiah 8:3; Huldah, in the latter days of Israel's monarchy (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22); and Noadiah, a false prophetess, after the exile (Nehemiah 6:14). Five prophetesses in fourteen hundred years and now two simultaneously! This is significant! God was working in new and marvelous ways! Significantly, too, we have the first lifetime Nazarite in John the Baptist since Samuel, the first in one thousand years.

These developments were clear signs that something momentous was about to happen. God had announced the Messiah's prophesied forerunner even before his birth. God had established a sinless virgin conception for His Son so that He would be qualified to be the Savior. Elizabeth had acknowledged the inferiority of her son to the Messiah; and Mary had acknowledged and confirmed her virgin conception. God set about establishing

infallible proofs of who Jesus was long before John or Jesus made any claims in their ministries!

We can be challenged by these verses because they show us that God grants righteous people, who are yielded to Him, the privilege of being included in His plans. We should all stand in awe of how God oversaw the events which led up to Christ's advent in such minute detail. If this was so important to Him, how much importance should we place in our study of His Son, and on our obedience and dedication to His Son? The kind of dedication Mary, Elizabeth, and Zacharias possessed prepared them to endure whatever suffering might come so that we might have a Savior. This should make us reconsider our commitment to Christ and the priority we give Him in our lives.

This introduction to our Lord's earthly history should not only reinforce our faith but also encourage us to understand more about His role as our Savior and to make seeking His will the all-important priority of our lives.

Next week we'll continue as we work our way towards Christmas and the birth of Christ by looking at some of the remarkable events surrounding the birth of John the Baptist and the prophecy issued by his father, Zacharias. Don't miss it!