

# “The Holy Spirit Can Use You”

*Luke 1:1-25*

At this time of year we turn once again to those familiar passages of Scripture surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ our Saviour. Since this is Scripture – God’s living Word – we can come to it again and again and learn by looking at the narratives from different perspectives. While we were going through 1 Corinthians and reading a lot about the Holy Spirit, the Spirit Himself brought to my attention how often He shows up in the birth accounts of John the Baptist and Jesus. Luke especially makes note of the Spirit’s involvement in bringing Jesus into the world. This is the perspective I would like us to focus on as we prepare for Jesus’ coming once again. I say prepare for Jesus’ coming because ‘Advent’ means arrival or coming and we reenact the waiting of Jesus’ first coming yet at the same time are waiting for his return.

The first sign of the Spirit’s involvement comes from Luke’s prologue even though the Spirit is not mentioned by name. So how is the Spirit involved in Luke’s prologue? From 2 Peter 1:19-21

*<sup>19</sup> And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. <sup>20</sup> Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. <sup>21</sup> For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

Luke is one of those whom the Spirit

## **Moved Godly Men to Write Truth that is Certain** **(1:1-4)**

Luke was a Gentile doctor, a follower of Jesus and a companion of Paul on his 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journeys and from what we can gather stayed close to Paul right up until his death which happened shortly after Paul wrote 2 Timothy. Listen to his one sentence (in the Greek) prologue,

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, <sup>2</sup> just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*

That word in 2 Peter 1:21 for “moved” means to be carried along like steering a boat. The Spirit uses Luke’s faith, his skills, his education and his personality to write his gospel account so that people will know that what he wrote was accurate and true. He writes to a person named Theophilus, prefaced by most excellent, signifying he was an important official or a person of wealth and standing in Roman circles. We don’t know who he was for sure but he was either a high-ranking or influential Gentile for whom Luke wanted to provide a detailed, historical account of Christ and the spread of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Or an influential government official, or even Paul’s Roman lawyer who is trying to prevent Paul’s death by showing Christianity is not a threat.

But what is fascinating is that the Holy Spirit moves Luke to write an accurate gospel account for Gentiles predominantly targeting educated people. Luke's style of writing is what is known as classic Greek, whereas Mark's is a very common form of Greek. Matthew's audience is primarily Jewish while John's style is very theological. Luke is very practical and methodical. The Spirit uses different people with different abilities and skills who have different circles of influence to get the truth out in a way that all people can understand what the truth is about Jesus. The Spirit moved Luke and the others to write these true accounts of Jesus because as Luke points out other people had written about Jesus and not all of them were accurate. The Spirit oversaw the accuracy of Jesus' narrative being told.

Luke investigates everything from the beginning checking with as many eyewitnesses as possible. Most feel he spoke to Mary directly to get some of the details of the first 2 chapters. The Spirit of God uses Luke and his skills, guiding him along as Luke faithfully follows God's Word and Spirit-led guidance to help us even 2000 years later know what He the Spirit the author of Scripture wanted us to know about Jesus and living this life of faith.

But its not just the Luke's the Spirit uses. As Luke begins the life of John the Baptist we are fully aware that the Spirit

## **Uses Ordinary People Who are Serving the Lord** **(1:5-10)**

The accuracy and historicity of what we are reading is affirmed by Luke through the Spirit when he begins not with 'once upon a time' but stamping this in time and history.

<sup>5</sup>*In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.* <sup>6</sup>*Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.* <sup>7</sup>*But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.* <sup>8</sup>*Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God,* <sup>9</sup>*he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.* <sup>10</sup>*And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.*

Real events. Real people. Real places. Herod the Great, as he called himself, was a great builder and did a lot of good for Judea and the area but he was also a ruthless and paranoid king who killed wives and sons if he thought they were a threat to his rule. He even killed baby boys because he knew he wasn't the rightful king and the prophesied Messiah was.

When terrible world leaders are in power the Holy Spirit is working in the background fulfilling God's plan to bring Jesus to the world; whether it's the past incarnation or His future return or in the present with the gospel through you and I. Jesus assured us in John 5:17 that he and His Father are always working and since the Spirit is part of the Trinity, so is He. The problem isn't that He isn't working, the problem is we don't believe He's working because we can't see what He's doing

Take Zechariah (whose name means my God remembers) and Elizabeth (whose name means my God is an oath). We are told they are righteous or upright in the sight of God. He was a priest and she was the daughter of a priest. All priests are physical descendants of Aaron, Moses' brother. This is the "perfect" Jewish couple. Observing God's commandments consistently and blamelessly. Blameless doesn't mean perfect. It means you have a solid character; that people have a hard time coming up with something negative to say about you. Zechariah and Elizabeth were so perfect from a

Jewish perspective that Elizabeth, a priest's daughter had the same name as Aaron's wife, Elisheba (Ex. 6:23). If they were so perfect why do we read they had no children and they were well along in years?

Do you want to know how righteous Zechariah was? The rabbis of his day came up with the 7 top reasons to divorce your wife. #1? Childlessness. Yet here they are, faithful to God, faithful to each other even though God had 'cursed' them with no children (that's what the Jewish people in their day would have concluded).

But God uses people like Zechariah and Elizabeth; people others think are defective, or cursed thinking there must be something wrong with them. Underline the word "Once". God only needs one moment, one time in your life where He will change your life and put you in a new direction. Once when it was Zechariah's turn to go to Jerusalem and serve at the temple, God did something special. There were 24 divisions of priests (we read in 1 Chron. 24:10) and each priest would have 2 separate one-week terms of ministry at the temple in a year. Their main task was to slaughter animals for sacrifices. Sometimes you got to make the showbread or light the menorah or pray or, once in a lifetime the lot might be cast and it was your turn to go alone in the Holy place and burn incense at the altar of incense which stood outside the curtain to the Holy of Holies, which is where the Ark was. Apparently, historians tell us there were 18,000 priests at that time so you had .00005% chance of being picked. Prov. 16:33 says

*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.*

God made sure this righteous, faithful yet heart-broken couple were going to be used for His purposes in a might way.

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

The last time Israel heard from a prophet of God was 400 years earlier through Malachi. Malachi ends with a prophecy about one coming in the 'Spirit and power of Elijah' to prepare people for the Messiah's coming. And it is through Zechariah and Elizabeth's son that the Holy Spirit's

## **Ministry to Open People's Hearts** **(1:11-17)**

... will happen. Zechariah's one-time opportunity to stand in front of the Holy of Holies and pray on Israel's behalf is interrupted by an answer to prayer! Gabriel, the angel who stands in God's actual presence now stands in front of the symbolic presence of God telling Zechariah that his prayer is answered. What kind of prayer did God answer by the power of His Spirit?

***Prayers that God can do the impossible (vv.11-14)***

“Your prayer” is in the singular. What prayer? *“Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son”*. But Zechariah’s prayer is also Israel’s prayer for the Messiah because the Spirit will use John to open people’s hearts to God. God has been silent but now no longer. He’s going to do the impossible; allow Elizabeth and Zechariah to have a child. Specifically a son. And God says his name will be John and he will be their joy [finally] and many will rejoice because of his birth.

Just like the Exodus, God had heard His people’s cry for a deliverer. It is time. And to show God’s deliverer is coming God gives Israel a miraculous sign by doing the impossible; allowing a barren elderly couple to finally produce a son. But this is nothing new for God or the power of His Spirit. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Samson’s parents, Elkanah and Hannah, and now Zechariah and Elizabeth. God said in Malachi 4 He would send a messenger to clear the way for the Messiah (Mal. 3:1) and that He would turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and not bring about the destruction on their land (Mal. 4:5-6).

It felt that way for Israel under Roman oppression. They were looking for the Messiah we know that much. Is it a whole lot different today? Does it not feel like the world is heading for destruction; morally, economically and literally as nations utter threats back and forth? Won’t Jesus come again when the world seems to be on the brink of destruction according to Zech 13-14? We’re not there yet. The Spirit of God is still moving in the hearts of people and using ordinary people like ourselves to change the hearts of people towards God and His Son Jesus. The Spirit’s ministry is to open people’s hearts

### ***Through Spirit-filled people (vv.15-17)***

Gabriel says John will be great in the sight of the Lord and Spirit-filled from birth. That’s new. Under the Old Covenant – which this still was – the Spirit empowered leaders and prophets for God-designed tasks but He did not dwell in people as He does now. Jesus said that wouldn’t happen to his followers until after He rose. So John is a sign that things are going to change. That the role of the Spirit is changing as Jesus comes.

As we saw last week in 1 Cor. 12:13, all disciples of Jesus are baptized by the Spirit into union with Christ and His body, the church. Now that we’ve been sealed by the Spirit and He dwells in us, we too can be filled. We are commanded to be filled by the Spirit, letting Him control us as we obey His Word over our desires and the worldly choices we are tempted with. When we allow the Spirit to fill/control us, the evidence of His filling will be spiritual fruit. We’ll be more loving, have real joy, sense more peace, display more kindness and patience, trust God by faith more, be gentler and control ourselves by the Spirit’s power when tempted to sin. And this will result in hearts changing. 1 Pet. 3:14-17 says,

*<sup>14</sup> But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.” <sup>15</sup> But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, <sup>16</sup> keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. <sup>17</sup> It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.*

When we let the Spirit guide our lives we will also be more ready to share the message that will turn people to the Lord. But Zechariah, for all his godly character, wasn’t quite ready to accept what Gabriel said. *“How can I be sure of this?”* after an angel miraculously shows up and talks to you, is not a statement of belief. And if we’re not careful the Holy Spirit’s

## **Work Can Be Quenched When We Doubt** **(1:18-25)**

In 1 Thes. 5:19-21 (NASB) Paul commands believers,

**19** Do not quench the Spirit, **20** do not utterly reject prophecies, **21** but examine everything; hold firmly to that which is good, **22** abstain from every form of evil.

While Zechariah didn't have that verse available to him, He clearly doubted the Spirit's prophecy concerning them having a son. Before we cast stones at Zechariah (guessing he's in his 50's or probably older) he has been disappointed most of his adult life. Not having children, probably rejected by many of his peers, maybe even encouraged to divorce his wife and living under Roman oppression and under the rule of a tyrant, he probably had little hope in miracles. And his doubt costs him and us too when we doubt God can use us

### ***We lose out on blessings (vv.18-22)***

Gabriel says Zechariah will not be able to speak until the day of John's birth because he did not believe God's words. And when he came out of the Holy Place after people were wondering why he was taking so long, he could have announced that the Messiah was coming. But he lost that blessing. "God has finally answered our prayers!" he could have shouted but instead he was silenced.

When we disobey God and doubt He can use us I'm sure we miss out on many blessings. At the very least we miss out on the joy of obedience. Jesus said in John 15:10,

*<sup>10</sup> If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. <sup>11</sup> I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

Like Zechariah, we will miss out on telling others how God is working because we're not believing He will.

### ***Yet He will not give up on us (vv.23-25)***

Zechariah goes home. He lies with his wife and she becomes pregnant – as the Spirit said. And instead of us hearing Zechariah's announcement we hear Elizabeth speak,

*"The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."*

Does she know about Gabriel's message? Did Zechariah write it out for her? I'm sure he did. And Zechariah will get another opportunity to announce to the people what God had done by the power of His Spirit. He got another chance, so will we if we repent of our doubts and quenching of the Spirit and grieving of the Spirit when we sin.

The Spirit is still working through God's Word speaking reminding us of the words of Jesus and the prophets and so many more. Will we listen when He brings these truths to our mind? To repent of sin when He convicts us? To trust God's ways when we're worried? To get together with believers when we know we should? To be involved in ministry with our gifts, not hindering the body by our lack of involvement?

Like Zechariah we may not doubt God can do great things we just don't believe He can do it through us. Next week we'll read about a teenager who will believe God can bring the Messiah into the world through her. God may not be asking us to do the impossible but He is still asking us to bring the message that the Messiah, Jesus our Saviour has already come. And He's paid for everyone's sins and they don't know or understand that forgiveness is available and hope and joy above this life is there's if they want it.

Let's believe by faith in the Spirit's power to work in us and through us as we obey His Word and allow Him to fill us this week. Let's meditate on Gal. 2:20

*<sup>20</sup> I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."*

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