

# LUKE 1

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## **Luke 1:5–25. Zacharias and Elisabeth**

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 104–105.*

Zacharias's appearance in Luke's story achieves much of the effect that the man Nicodemus does in John's Gospel (see John 3). Both are respected members of society, an observation that rests on their respective stations in life when the narratives of Luke and John find them. Both represent examples of devoted, deeply faithful people who are sensitive to and observant of the religious standards of their day. Both stand in for others of their kind who, as they do, receive satisfaction in lives dedicated to God. And both are blind and unresponsive to what they meet when they finally encounter divine power and teaching. We learn that this situation changes in Zacharias's case; concerning Nicodemus, we know only that he remains sympathetic to Jesus to his death (see John 19:39).

One of the results of Zacharias's condition is that he is left entombed within his mind, rolling the angel's words through his head again and again with little ability to communicate with others. Because later in the story he is ready to receive God's healing and prophetic powers (see Luke 1:64, 67–79), we sense that during the months of his imposed silence he is continually wrestling with his proper relationship to God. Even though he starts badly, he succeeds marvelously. We see his ennobling response to duty in the fact that he stays to the end of his week of service rather than retreating (see 1:23). We then assume that he returns to the temple about six months later when his order again has responsibility, even though he is limited in what he can do and even though other priests may look askance at him because of his seeming botch of the incense-lighting service. If he had not come back to serve as expected, we judge that Luke would have made a note of it.

Concerning Elisabeth, we perceive that she is already a spiritually susceptible person who intensifies her holy ways so that when her young cousin Mary visits her, God can pour out His Spirit on her (see 1:41–45). Moreover, throughout her married life she endures her acquaintances’ reproaches, both spoken and unspoken. As with her husband, the news that she will bear a son must catch her completely off guard. How Zacharias communicates this fact to her we do not know. We assume that like most women of her day, Elisabeth is illiterate. So Zacharias presumably cannot communicate directly with her by writing, but perhaps he could through a literate family member. By the time of her son’s birth, Elisabeth knows what his name is to be (see 1:59–60).

Fortunately the priest Zacharias enjoys the support of a loyal wife. Though he disappoints the angel of God with his response, Elisabeth still stands by him and nurtures him through the long, silent months that follow his once-in-a-lifetime service at the incense altar. The two of them stand as shining examples of how a couple can pull together to meet a significant challenge, even if the challenge affects one person more than the other.

## **Luke 1:26–38. Mary**

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 111–113.*

The earliest prophecy about Mary and her son comes from the lips of Isaiah more than seven hundred years before her birth. On a day in 734 BC, when the Syrian and northern Israelite armies surround Jerusalem, King Ahaz and his entourage walk outside the protective walls of the city to inspect “the conduit of the upper pool,” which brings water into the city possibly from the northern pool of the Bethesda pools. There, within bowshot of the hostile armies, Isaiah meets the king to assure him that the siege will soon end. Additionally, he prophesies that the sign of the Lord’s deliverance will be that “a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). Though the meaning of these words has stirred debate and though the prophet Nephi makes nothing of the words when he quotes them from his own copy of Isaiah’s record (see 2 Nephi 17:14), reasons exist to see them pointing to Mary and Jesus. What is the evidence?

First, although the Hebrew term translated “virgin” can refer to a young woman, married or unmarried, the third-century Jewish translator of this passage into Greek renders the word as *parthenos*, showing that he understands the term to refer to an unmarried virgin. Hence, one modern interpretation—that the word refers to Isaiah’s wife—does not square with this ancient translator’s view.

Second, the promised child is hard to explain if we hold that the Savior is that child. Why? Because Isaiah tells King Ahaz that by the time the child learns how “to refuse the evil, and choose the good,” both of the warring kings will be dead (Isaiah 7:16). This passage sounds as if the child will be a contemporary of

Isaiah and the king. That view is a real possibility, but the name Immanuel potentially points to another era, to another reality. The meaning of Immanuel, “God with us,” carries within it a promise of God’s presence among His people, not in some vague sense but in a concrete, palpable way. Almost immediately we think of John’s lines about the Savior: “The Word was made flesh, and *dwelt* among us” (John 1:14; emphasis added).

Concerning Mary, it is in the Book of Mormon that she most visibly stands forth as a person known to God long before her birth. Though the young prophet Nephi does not learn her name, he sees her in a vision “bearing a child in her arms” almost six hundred years before she is born. The virgin of the vision, as the accompanying angel tells Nephi, “is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.” In addition, she will reside in Nazareth (1 Nephi 11:20, 18, 13). About a hundred years before she is born, an angel visits an aging king named Benjamin and reveals that the coming Savior’s “mother shall be called Mary” (Mosiah 3:8). The precision of the prophecy in naming her is remarkable. Two generations later but long before her birth, the prophet Alma declares that Mary will be “a precious and chosen vessel,” effectively making it known that she is already well regarded in heavenly realms (Alma 7:10).

## **Luke 1:39–56. Mary and Elisabeth**

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 119–121.*

Engaging is the elegance of this story about two women who have taken very different routes in their lives to arrive at this moment. Luke’s superb skill is evident—holding the story together not with action but with spiritually compelling words from these women. Despite that skill, the material is already in place—a lofty yet earthly exchange between two of God’s noble daughters in Elisabeth’s home environment, where spiritual power is already flowing. In a warm and down-to-earth mixture, Elisabeth’s words welcome Mary, reveal God’s enlightenment, speak of her own unborn child, and prophesy about the younger woman’s future. Mary’s response holds the focus on God’s mercy to her and, in words dressed in prophecy, to all generations “that fear him” (Luke 1:50).

These verses also disclose much about Elisabeth. Because of the unimpeded flow of God’s spirit into her, it is evident that she has been laboring in spiritual preparation for mothering a child of promise (see the note on 1:5–25). Moreover, we can safely presume that these intense efforts do not differ much from her past actions but rather show her to be a person of long-standing spiritual character. Her efforts to set her life squarely onto God’s path also open her to the spirit of prophecy wherein she both learns what she cannot know about Mary and her special child and predicts what is yet in store for her young cousin (see 1:42–45). In fact, in speaking about Mary, “the mother of my Lord,” Elisabeth acts as her own son will act—as the herald of the Messiah. Moreover, her unswerving worthiness, hinted at in these verses (1:39–56), will

bring to her unborn son an unparalleled blessing: he will be “filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb” (1:15; see also Doctrine and Covenants 84:27).

In another vein, Mary’s song (Luke 1:46–55) sets the awe-inspiring tone for the whole of Luke’s Gospel. It will be a story of God’s mercy, first and foremost—a mercy that will succor the poor and downtrodden and will be withdrawn from those who do not fear God. In a word, within Luke’s record, Mary’s son will bring down “the proud” and “the mighty” while lifting “them of low degree” and “the hungry.” To “his servant Israel,” and to others on the outside, Mary’s child will extend His arm of strength and support (1:51–54).

In the end, Luke leaves us with an ennobling view of the two women around whom his narrative here rotates. In a quiet corner of the muscular Roman Empire, two women embrace. Safely entrusted to them by God is the secret of the ages: who the mother of the Messiah will be.

## **Luke 1:57–80. Zacharias and John**

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 130–132.*

The birth, naming, and angelic ordaining of John the Baptist mark a lofty point in the infant’s history, for now events become palpably real. First, they point to the predictive yet firm, almost concrete power of prophecy: John’s birth and naming are uttered beforehand in the words of the angel, and now he is physically here, safely inside his parents’ home (see Luke 1:13). Second, they make tangible the miraculous actions of God in this world in the form of a child’s unexpected but real birth to aging parents—completing their family—and in the sudden, public healing of Zacharias. Third, they embody God’s mercy inside an infant who is both to influence his fellow citizens and “to prepare [the Messiah’s] ways” (1:76; see Doctrine and Covenants 84:28).

One effect of the events during this miraculous day is to enliven a group of witnesses to God’s stirrings. Those at the temple who see Zacharias emerge with his speech and hearing curtailed know that something unusual is afoot (see Luke 1:21–22). However, Zacharias’s sudden inability to communicate will leave little that people can grasp except to know that something uncommon occurs that day in the temple. Instead, it is in Zacharias’s home, rather than at the temple, where God uncovers His powers, all in a single day. The numbers of witnesses will grow, of course, when God adds the shepherds and Simeon and Anna.<sup>1</sup>

At last, Zacharias’s words, pent up for about a year, now burst forth on the day of his son’s naming and circumcision. Those words not only confer a blessing on his son but also bring to completion his once-in-a-lifetime experience of leading the daily worship service while standing at the incense altar inside the temple’s sanctuary. The angel’s visit interrupts the service and prevents Zacharias from offering the

priestly prayer. Now, in naming his son, he finally finishes the task of offering his prayer, making his home an extension of the temple and establishing it as a holy place where God's spirit can dwell.

As a light perfume that graces the air, the fragrant promise of God's mercy wafts almost effortlessly through these verses. Elisabeth's "neighbors and her cousins" recognize the scent of God's "mercy upon her" (1:58). Further, Zacharias's words point back to "the mercy promised to our fathers," which will continue and become visible to the senses, even solid, in events yet to unfold (1:72). Lastly, Zacharias's son will generously offer "the knowledge of salvation" to his people that will bring "the remission of their sins," all springing out of and resting on "the tender mercy of our God." In John's birth, the day of God's graciousness dawns, "the dayspring from on high hath visited us" (1:77-78).

## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> See Luke 2:8-14, 25-38; note on 1:5-25.

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