

THE LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST

WEEK TWO – THE EARLY YEARS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST AND JESUS CHRIST

THE BIRTHS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST AND JESUS CHRIST ARE FORETOLD

1) The birth of John the Baptist is foretold – Luke 1:1-25 (6-5 BC)

While the exact birth dates for John and Jesus are not known, Luke opens his story between 6-5 BC., with their actual births taking place in 5-4 BC. This is the result of knowing Herod the Great's year of death – 4 BC. Our story begins at the Temple in the city of Jerusalem.

- a. This is the first fresh word from God in 400 years, and connects directly with the last verses of the OT in Malachi 4:5-6.
- b. This is a dark time in Israel's history. They are under the fist of Roman rule and the paranoid Herod the Great. The local ruling body, the Sanhedrin was divided evenly between the legalistic Pharisees and their hundreds of traditions and rules and the Sadducees, and their thirst for power. The common people were over taxed and living day to day.
- c. Zachariah (Jehovah remembers) and Elizabeth (God is my oath) are a godly couple, both descendants of Levi. Despite this faithful walk with God, they are childless. This would have puzzled them, for being childless was seen as a curse from God.
- d. The priests were divided into 24 Courses (groups), each of which served at the Temple two weeks each year. In addition, all priests served at the Temple for the six national Feasts, one week each. According to Numbers 8:24-26, a priest began to serve at the age of 25 and retired at the age of 50. By the first century some sources indicate the starting age might have been 30. Since Zachariah is described as a man who was 'advanced in years', he is probably approaching 50 and retirement from service at the Temple.
- e. The priests on duty would draw lots to see what ministry they would perform. Zachariah was chosen to enter the Holy Place in the Temple, and offer prayer for the nation at the Altar of Incense. This was done twice each day, around dawn and late afternoon. This was a high honor permitted to a priest once in a lifetime. Many priests were never chosen for this task. It had to be even more exciting for Zachariah, since he was towards the end of his career.
- f. Zachariah has placed the incense on the altar and is praying when the angel Gabriel appears and announces the coming birth of a son. (vs. 11-17)
 - Your prayers for a son are about to be answered.
 - Your prayers for the nation are about to be answered.
 - You will have a son who is to be named John.
 - His birth will bring great joy and rejoicing.
 - He is to be totally dedicated to God and His work. In fact he will be filled with the Holy Spirit at conception.
 - He will prepare the people of Israel for their coming Messiah.
- g. Zachariah is unable to get past the issue of his and Elizabeth's age, so he asks for a sign that all of this will indeed take place. Gabriel's response indicates this hesitation is a lack of faith and trust in his words.
- h. So Zachariah gets his sign – he is struck dumb (and probably deaf). This sign is a form of discipline for his lack of faith and an act of assurance, that the promise given by God through Gabriel will take place.
- i. Zachariah probably couldn't wait to finish his week of service and get home to 'tell' Elizabeth what had happened. In faith, they engage in sexual relations, and Elizabeth conceives.

2) The birth of Jesus Christ is foretold – Luke 1:26-56 (six months later)

- a. The Jews in Judea, especially in Jerusalem, disdained the Jews who lived in Galilee, claiming they were not 'kosher' because of their contact with Gentiles. In fact, they referred to them as 'Galilee of the Gentiles'. Because a Roman garrison was located just outside their town, Nazareth was considered the lowest of the low. The town is never mentioned in the OT, Jewish writings or histories. From the beginning, Jesus is going to come from humble roots.
- b. Mary is a young teenage girl, probably around 13 years old. She is a virgin, and is engaged to a carpenter named Joseph. Both are from the family line of the great King David, and both are from poor families. Engagement was considered the first phase of marriage, and could only be broken by a divorce. This phase lasted 9-12 months, as the groom prepared a house/room for them and the bride proved her purity and prepared their household items.
- c. The angel Gabriel is again the messenger sent by God. His greeting is designed to set Mary's mind at ease.
 - 'Greetings' – a casual greeting used in normal interactions – 'Hello...'
 - 'Favored One' – literally 'Full of grace'. The recipient of God's abundant grace and blessing.
 - 'The Lord is with you' – God's enabling presence. God didn't send his grace in a box as a gift. He Himself is the source and the One bestowing the gift.
- d. Mary's response:
 - 'Greatly troubled' – perplexed, confused, disturbed.
 - 'Tried to discern...' – As we will continue to see, Mary is a reflective, sensitive person who thinks deeply about life.
- e. Gabriel Continues:
 - 'Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God' – He continues to calm Mary's emotions.
 - You will conceive a son – Jesus's humanity
 - And name him Jesus (Yahweh saves)
 - 'He will be great' – He, in and of Himself. He will not do great things, but Jesus defines greatness. Eph.1:21-23; Phil. 2:9-11
 - He will be the Son of the Most High – Jesus' deity
 - The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David – He will be the long awaited Messiah
 - He will reign forever

From Matthew 1:20-21:

 - He will be conceived by the Holy Spirit
 - He will save His people from their sin
- f. Mary's question – How can this be, since I am a virgin? Her question, unlike Zacharias' does not communicate doubt, but of seeking understanding. How does a virgin conceive a child without having sexual relations with a man?
- g. Gabriel's Answer:
 - 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you; the power of the Most High will overshadow you' – This reflects all the way back to Genesis 1, where the Spirit of God is seen as the agent of creation; creation from nothing. The 'Most High' was a name that pointed to God's sovereign control over all creation. The God who created all there is with the breath of His voice; the God who sovereignly controls the universe and its laws, will come upon you and bring about this conception.
 - Mary is then given a sign, even though she does not ask for one. We now know why God delayed Zacharias and Elizabeth's having a child... so her pregnancy could be used as a sign that would reassure Mary's heart that God was indeed behind this message.

- h. Mary's Response – Simple, humble, faith-filled submission as a servant of the Living God. Mary knows the risk this divine pregnancy will bring her, as she will be seen as a sinner who betrayed her vows to remain chaste until her wedding night at best and at worse, an adulteress worth of death.
- i. Mary travels to see Elizabeth. This would have been a 75-90 mile trip that would have taken 3-4 days. She will spend 3 months, returning to Nazareth just before the birth of John.
 - The words of Gabriel are confirmed by Elizabeth's pregnancy, words of greeting, response of her unborn child, and Elizabeth's prophetic words.
 - Mary responds with a beautiful song of praise known as 'The Magnificat'. This song expresses humble worship and serves as a great example for us. The greater the work God chooses to do in and through us, the more important it is that we deflect attention from ourselves to God; from the instrument God chose to use to the God who used the instrument.

3) The birth of John the Baptist – Luke 1:57-80 (5-4 BC)

John's birth demonstrates that God's promises are true and will be fulfilled. 2 Cor. 1:20; Hebrews 10:23

- a. As Elizabeth gives birth to John the words of Gabriel are fulfilled, as her neighbors and relatives join her in celebrating his birth.
 - 'Great Mercy' – God's loving action towards people and their needs and pain.
- b. When a male reached the age of eight days he was circumcised, marking him as a member of God's chosen people. In the first century it had become customary to announce the child's name at this time. Most boys were either named for after one of their grandfathers or their father. So when Elizabeth announces that his name will be John, there is an immediate reaction. The friends and relatives that had gathered for the circumcision go to Zachariah and ask him for the name of this child.
- c. As Zacharias acknowledges that the child's name is to be John he makes a statement of faith and obedience to what God had said through Gabriel. Note that it is at this moment that he is able to hear and speak, not the actual birth of John 8 days earlier.
 - 'John' – God is gracious
- d. As Zachariah begins to speak all of the pent-up emotions of 9 months come out as he prophesizes about his son and the Messiah he had been born to announce. The key points of this prophecy are:
 - The birth of his son meant the coming of the Messiah was near. Notice that Zachariah's focus is on the Messiah, not his own son.
 - John will be a prophet.
 - John, as the forerunner, was to be the 'front man' for the Messiah so people will be prepared for him.
 - This preparation would bring:
 - A Knowledge of salvation
 - Forgiveness of sin
 - The tender mercy of God
 - The beginning of a new day/new creation (2 Cor. 5:17)
 - Light in the midst of darkness
 - Guidance to walk with God
- e. As John became of man, he developed a strong spirit and was a man of conviction and determination. Once he was of age, he went out into the Judean wilderness to prepare for his ministry.

4) The circumstances of Jesus birth is explained to Joseph – Matthew 1:18-25

- a. As Mary returns to Nazareth she is 3-4 months pregnant. We are not told when or how she explains things to Joseph, but we know he is not able to believe her story.
- b. We know very little about Joseph other than he is in the family tree of King David, is a righteous man, is a carpenter by trade and comes from a poor family.
- c. The seriousness of being betrothed is seen by the fact Matthew refers to Joseph as Mary's husband. Joseph has three options before him:
 - He can take Mary to the Elders, accuse her of adultery and have her publically disgraced. He could demand she be stoned, though that was not common in first century Israel.
 - He can quietly divorce her with no formal accusation. This will save her public humiliation.
 - He can follow through and complete his marriage to her, claiming the child as his own.Joseph decides to go with the second option.
- d. Before Joseph can follow through with this plan he is visited by an angel in a dream. The angel assures Joseph that Mary is telling the truth, and that the child she is carrying is indeed from God, and a fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. Joseph has the faith to believe the angel and takes immediate action. He takes Mary home to be his wife, though their marriage is not consummated until after the birth of Jesus. To the people of Nazareth, this is an admission that the child Mary is carrying is his, and that they had not waited until their wedding night to have sexual relations. While not entirely unusual, their reputation is tarnished for life.

5) The birth of Jesus – Luke 2:1-21 circa 4 BC

- a. The prophet Micah had prophesized that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). To fulfill this prophecy, God moved the hand of Caesar Augustus, the most powerful man in the world, to call for a census. Since it was the Jewish custom to identify with your ancestral home, this causes Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem shortly before she was due to give birth.
- b. Though it was probably not necessary, Mary accompanies Joseph to Bethlehem; a challenging 70+ mile trip over rough roads.
 - It could have been because Mary did not want to be left alone in a town where she was the object of gossip.
 - Perhaps Joseph and Mary, who would have been familiar with the Messianic prophecies, knew that this was God's hand taking them to Bethlehem.
 - Perhaps Joseph didn't want to miss the birth of this very special child
- c. While in Bethlehem, Mary delivers Jesus, the Christ.
 - Other than knowing it was not the local inn, we are not sure where Jesus was born in Bethlehem.
 - He was laid in a manger or feeding trough. These would have been found anywhere animals were kept, including open fields. Tradition indicates the birth took place in a shallow cave where animals were kept.
- d. The first ones told of the birth of Jesus the Savior were a group of shepherds outside of Bethlehem. This was unexpected for they were towards the bottom of the social ladder. Because of the care sheep required, shepherds were in perpetual violation of various Sabbath and cleansing traditions and laws. Thus they were considered unclean.
- e. An angel suddenly appears to them, bathing them and the field they are in with the glory of God. The angel delivers a message to them from God:
 - Fear not, for I have come to give you good news that will be for all people.
 - There was born this day in Bethlehem a child who is Savior; Christ and God. Your long awaited Messiah has come!

- You will find him wrapped with swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. The angel is then joined by a multitude of angels, praising God.

- f. The shepherds immediately leave their flocks and head for Bethlehem, where they see the Christ child.
- After leaving the young family, they begin to tell anyone who will listen about what they have seen. They are the first evangelists! However, shepherds were not considered fit to serve as a witness in court. It may well be that while people wondered at what they said, their word was not considered reliable by most. As they return to their flocks, they continue to praise and worship God.
 - Mary's response is to treasure (hold as precious and valuable) and ponder (reflect or meditate on) all that has happened in the past nine months.

6) Jesus is presented in the Temple – Luke 2:22-38 40 days after the birth of Jesus

- a. A mother was considered unclean and unable to worship at the Temple for a period of 40 days after giving birth. Luke indicates that Mary has completed these 40 days. They travel the 8 miles from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to present Jesus to the Lord as their first born. According to the Law, every first born son was to be given to God. That required the parents to present an offering to God as a substitute for the child. This sacrifice was to be a lamb. However, if the parents were unable to afford a lamb, they could sacrifice two turtledoves or pigeons. The fact Joseph and Mary sacrifice two birds indicates their poverty.
- b. Simeon is described in verses 25-27. Then he speaks prophetic words over the baby Jesus:
- He will be a light to the Gentiles – revealing the One true God to them.
 - He will be glory to the people of Israel – fulfilling this when He returns to establish His Kingdom
 - People's response to Jesus will reveal their hearts towards God.
 - A sword will pierce Mary – when she watches the hands and feet of Jesus pierced by the nails.
- c. Anna is described in verses 36-38. She adds her voice of praise and testimony to that of Simeon.

7) The visit of the Magi – Matthew 2:1-23 Jesus is around one years old.

Joseph and Mary made the decision to stay in Bethlehem instead of going back to Nazareth. Verse 11 tells us they are now living in a house.

- a. Wise men from the east – These men were highly educated scholars with knowledge of mathematics, science, astronomy, religions and often served as advisors to rulers. Daniel would have been considered a 'wise man'. They were probably from Mesopotamia, though we are not told their home country. They are familiar with the OT, probably influenced by the writings of Daniel. They may have been familiar with Numbers 24:17, and recognized the star placed by God to guide them.
- b. As they arrive in Jerusalem, they would have assumed everyone had heard about the birth of their king! So they simply start to ask whomever they meet, until word of their arrival and question reach King Herod!
- c. Herod's reaction is predictable, considering what we know about him. He finds out where the Messiah is to be born, and hatches a plan to use the wise men to locate and kill this child.
- d. The wise men find the house where Joseph, Mary and Jesus are living and worship Him with their lips and their gifts.
- Gold
 - Frankincense – ceremonial incense. It was the only incense allowed in the Temple.
 - Myrrh – a sap used to make perfume, commonly used when preparing a body for burial.
- Warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they go back home by a different route.

- e. God warns Joseph to take his family to Egypt, out of the reach of Herod, who is determined to kill the Christ child. Undoubtedly the gifts of the wise men funded their time there. Herod unleashes one of the most horrendous acts in Biblical history, as he has all boys two years of age and under in Bethlehem killed.
- f. We do not know exactly how long the family of Jesus stays in Egypt, but it is probably not real long. Herod dies less than a year after they flee. Planning to return to Bethlehem, they change their mind when they discover Herod's son has replaced him. So they return to their home town of Nazareth after a 2-3 year absence.

8) The names of Jesus

- a. Jesus
- b. Son of the Most High
- c. The Son of God
- d. Savior
- e. Christ the Lord
- f. Immanuel
- g. King of the Jews

9) Jesus in the Temple at the age of 12 – Luke 2:40-52 AD 9

- a. Passover was the most sacred of the Jewish feasts. All Jewish men were required to attend, though their wives and children usually joined them if at all possible. This is the year Jesus turns 12, which is a very significant time. The next year, as he turns 13, Jesus will be welcome into the brotherhood of adulthood. As the family enters Jerusalem there are hundreds of thousands of people along with an equal number of sheep being brought for the family sacrifices. They would have traveled as part of a caravan of others from Nazareth.
- b. Unbeknownst to Joseph and Mary, Jesus stays back as the group heads for home. One full day's journey later they discover he is missing. One day to get back to the city and a full day of searching for him leads the frantic parents to the Temple, where they find Him sitting among and interacting with the teachers.
- c. Jesus understands that He is the Son of God. It is probable He has heard all of the stories surrounding His birth and early childhood. In addition, He surely has been given insights directly by the Father and The Holy Spirit. His words to His parents are not disrespectful, but stating fact. As Jesus enters adulthood, he has a growing awareness of Who He is. This is the first time Jesus claims deity. It will not be His last!
- d. This is the last we hear of Joseph. He will die sometime in the next 18 years, before Jesus starts His ministry.

10) The ministry of John the Baptist – Luke 3:1-22 AD 25 or 26

- a. Luke begins by explaining when John starts his ministry, as 7 different leaders are mentioned – an Emperor, a governor, three kings, and two high priests. None of them are chosen by God as a messenger.
- b. John the Baptist came in the spirit of Elijah, with the job of preparing the people of Israel for their Messiah.
 - John not only came in the spirit of Elijah, but also looked like him! This is the wardrobe of a prophet in the OT. In fact, though his life is recorded in the NT, John is the last of the prophets before the dawn of the Church Age.
 - He preached repentance, with the act of baptism as a sign of a changed heart. Baptism itself was not new to the Jews, for Gentiles who converted to Judaism were baptized. However, baptizing Jews was not heard of.
- c. John came 'as the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare your heart for the Lord.

- Repentance led to forgiveness.
 - One was to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Jesus would talk about this early in His ministry.
 - Some examples of this fruit include compassion, integrity, fairness, meekness and contentment.
- d. John was emphatic that he was not the Messiah, but a servant of the Messiah.
- His baptism was one of preparation. Jesus will come to bring a baptism of fire that will judge people's hearts. This will be fulfilled at His second coming.
 - John sees Himself as lower than the lowest servant, who would be given the responsibility of removing his master's sandals and washing his feet.
- e. Jesus comes to John to be baptized.
- In being baptized, Jesus identifies with those He was going to redeem.
 - His baptism signifies the official start of His ministry.
 - His baptism symbolizes His death and resurrection.
 - The Father speaks and affirms the identity of Jesus as His Son.
- f. Herod the tetrarch, the son of Herod the Great, stole his brother Phillip's wife away from him, bypassing the messy step of divorce. As John calls him on this sin, Herod has him arrested and thrown into prison.

11) The temptation of Jesus – Matthew 4: 1-11 AD 26

- a. Right after the beauty of His baptism, with the voice of His Father affirming Him, Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit to enter the bleak and isolated wilderness south of Jerusalem.
- This is a time for being alone with His Father, preparing for the three years that lie ahead. It is possible that Jesus receives deeper insights into His ministry. Even Christ needed alone time with God.
 - The primary purpose is to face Satan. The word 'tempted' means to be put to the test. It is in and of itself neutral, and takes its value from the intent of the test. In the case of Jesus, Satan intends to entice Him to sin. The Father intends to use these same tests to reveal His heart strengthen Jesus.
 - Adam faced his test from Satan in a perfect garden and failed. Jesus faces Satan in an isolated wilderness and is victorious!
- b. First, Satan tempts Jesus to use His divine power to serve Himself. This would have resulted in Jesus exercising His powers independently of the Father and His will.
- At its core, Satan is appealing to Jesus' pride, 'prove yourself'. Jesus had laid aside the independent use of His divine attributes and would use them only as the Father directed. Satan is also calling into question the Father's care for Jesus. If your Father isn't going to take care of you, take care of yourself!
 - Jesus responds by quoting Deut.8:3. He declares that He will not be driven by His physical needs or circumstances, but by the revealed will of God, found in His Word. He is also stating that our primary need is not physical satisfaction and nourishment, but spiritual nourishment. Jesus encourages us to seek this spiritual perspective in Matthew 6:31-33.
- c. The second temptation is to put God's love and power to the test. Satan takes Jesus to the top of the Temple, where it was 450 feet to the valley floor below. Tradition tells us that James, the half-brother of Jesus was martyred by being thrown from this very spot.
- Satan is enticing Jesus to use the sensational to prove He is indeed the Son of God. Then people will believe Him! However, those who later follow Jesus because of His miracles become among the first to turn against Him.
 - Jesus responds by quoting Deut. 6:16. Jesus declares that to put God to our own test is to doubt God and make Him subservient to our demands.

- d. The third temptation is to worship Satan in exchange for the glory he can give. Satan takes Jesus to a high mountain, and supernaturally shows the kingdoms of the world.
- Satan is saying 'why wait to receive what is rightfully yours? Why take the road that leads to the cross and death? I can give all of this to you right now.'
 - Jesus responds by quoting Deut. 6:13. We are to worship God and God alone. This worship is to be done in spirit and in truth, with total trust and loving obedience to Him.
 - Notice that Jesus has the authority to dismiss Satan.
- e. After Satan leaves, Jesus' needs are met by angels who are sent by the Father to minister to Him.