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From the Very First

Luke 1 & 2

The amazing story of Jesus's incredible roundtrip from heaven to earth is one that stirs my soul and produces in me an inexpressible love for God and for the Lord Jesus Christ. For God sent His Son into the world to save sinners, and at great cost; beyond our ability to comprehend, He secured our eternal welfare. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor; so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). We can conceive neither of the extent of His riches in heaven nor the depth of the poverty He assumed.

Jesus came from heaven to earth on a unique assignment. He came to die, but He had to die at a particular place, at a certain time, and in a certain violent manner. He was to travel from Bethlehem, the place of His birth, to Jerusalem, the place of His death, by a circuitous and dangerous route. All along the way, there would be those who would try to prevent Him from accomplishing His mission. And there was one impossible condition: This man must meet His destiny without ever having committed the slightest sin. He must die a perfect, sinless man, else He would have failed His mission. His destination was Jerusalem, but His destiny was death.

Why is the life of Jesus called the greatest story ever told? Because it illustrates the greatest love ever loved by the greatest

Being that ever existed for the greatest sinner who ever lived. All the elements of great drama are present. The two main characters, Jesus Christ, the protagonist, and Satan, the antagonist, provide tension for the plot as they do battle in the war declared by God in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:15). Satan was dogged in his determination to prevent Jesus from accomplishing His mission.

The colorful characters and varied events, the element of surprise, and Jesus's irretraceable steps toward His destination all work together to bring the action to its climax. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus wins the victory that God had promised with the words, "Thy will be done." The victory is consummated on Calvary.

The human instrument that God used to record this wondrous story was a man named Luke. An educated and cultured man, a physician, probably a Gentile, he was called beloved by Paul who knew him well. Reading through his account of the gospel, we would agree, for a compassionate, tender heart and a sensitive spirit are evident throughout.

In the introduction, Luke states his subject (those things which are believed among us); his purpose (that Theophilus would know the certainty of those things); his motivation (it seems good); his sources (eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word); and his qualifications (perfect understanding).

We admire the careful and scholarly way in which Luke tells the story of Jesus's life on earth. We imagine the many interviews he must have had, his patient search for eyewitnesses, the volume of material he must have collected. Under the control of the Holy Spirit, he set forth exactly those things God would have us know with certainty. Although consistent with the material in the other gospels, there is much in Luke peculiar to that gospel (most of chapters 1, 2, and 10 through 18). We are grateful that God chose to reveal these additional truths to us through His servant.

Luke must have spent many hours in Mary's company. Imagine how sweet it must have been for Mary to have someone so interested and eager for every fragment of her experiences as the mother of Jesus. Mary had pondered and kept many things in her heart. So much was indelible in her memory: the angel's

startling announcement, the glory song of the heavenly hosts, Elizabeth's unusual greeting, her own joyful hymn of praise to God; Simeon's words with their cryptic hint of sorrow; the meeting with Anna. Who but Mary could have supplied Luke with these details?

The story of Jesus does not begin with a description of historical conditions of the times, or of His birth, or His parents or their ancestry. It begins by introducing the godly parents of His herald, John the Baptist.

Zacharias, a priest, and his wife, Elizabeth, were both of priestly descent. We remember that Moses, whose parents were in the priestly line (Ex. 2:1) was also a herald of Christ (Gen. 3:15; see also Luke 24:27, 44). An old couple, Zacharias and Elizabeth were disappointed that God had never answered their prayers for a child. One day, God sent the angel Gabriel to tell Zacharias about His plans for their special child whose birth would be supernatural. He would be great in the sight of the Lord; he would turn many to the Lord and would prepare the way for the Christ. How magnificently did God answer their prayers! The child would be filled with the Holy Ghost before he was born. This is significant for those who are opposed to abortion, for it proves that to God an unborn baby is a living soul.

Here is a picture of the ideal couple. Zacharias and Elizabeth were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord (Luke 1:6). This does not mean that they never sinned; it does mean that the character or the inclination of their lives was above reproach and that the intent of their hearts was to obey God. Can you imagine any serious problems in a marriage where each partner is walking so close to the Lord and in His ways? Zacharias and Elizabeth were happy, for "Blessed [happy] are the undefiled in the way who walk in the law of the Lord" (Ps. 119:1). In the character of this godly woman, we can find an ideal for ourselves. Elizabeth was thankful, enthusiastic, joyful, gracious, humble, full of faith and full of the Spirit (Luke 1:25, 41-45). These qualities are representative of what we call the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

Gabriel made another appearance with another startling

announcement. He visited a virgin named Mary who was engaged to a man named Joseph. She would conceive and give birth to a Son.

There were a number of similarities in these two visits. In each case, the one visited was troubled at the appearance of such a strange and wonderful creature (1:12, 29). The angel reassured them, saying, “Fear not” (1:13, 30). He told each that a baby boy would be born, and he called these babies by their names (1:13, 31). They would both be miraculous births, or humanly impossible. The Holy Ghost would be essentially involved (1:15, 35). And, although each of these sons would be great in God’s sight (1:15, 32), they would have distinctly different roles. Appropriately symbolizing his purpose, John would be born three months before Jesus, for he was to go before and prepare the way for the Christ. Hundreds of years before, the prophet Isaiah had described John the Baptist as such: “a voice cries in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’” (Isa. 40:3; Matt. 3:1-3).

Zacharias and Mary responded to the words of the angel in significantly different ways. We can relate to the elderly priest’s incredulity—he wanted some assurance that this was really true. “How can I know it?” he asked. God was not pleased with disbelief, or lack of faith, and Zacharias was disciplined by being unable to speak until John was born.

Mary responded to the angel in faith. “How shall this be?” She knew it would be; she wondered how. Elizabeth later commended Mary’s faith with these words: “Blessed is she that believed; for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord” (Luke 1:45).

Mary’s immediate response to the angel’s announcement was to make a quick trip to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. Did she want proof of what the angel had told her? No. Mary believed. But we can understand her desire to see with her physical eyes evidence of what the angel had said about her barren, aged cousin. Did she go to visit Elizabeth to learn about the care and feeding of infants? Not unlikely. She and Elizabeth, despite the vast difference in their ages, were launching out together on this uncharted

sea of motherhood. Mary had much to learn and she sought a mature, wise, and godly woman for her model and teacher. Her three-month visit to Elizabeth was a beautiful example of the principle Paul taught Titus (Titus 2:3-5). Mary knew that God was entrusting her with a tremendous responsibility to create the best possible home environment for the child Jesus. She took it seriously.

We might ask, “Why Mary?” Was she the best there was, physically, intellectually, spiritually? Not necessarily. God did not choose her because she was the most deserving woman in the land. He chose her because He chose to choose her. Yet it was not an arbitrary choice. God had prepared a woman of unusual sweetness, humility, and devotion to Him; one who had strong faith and who loved His word, to be the physical mother of His Son. We do no wrong to appreciate, admire, and imitate Mary.

The time came for Jesus to arrive on earth and take the form of a human being (Gal. 4:4). We are familiar with the details of this beautiful story so carefully recounted by Luke (2:1-20). His arrival in the humblest of earthly settings was symbolic of the poverty He assumed for our riches (2 Cor. 8:9). “I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world . . .” (John 16:28, 17:5).

Nothing is said about the bare strangeness of the surroundings, the lack of comfort, the absence of love and support of family, or the pain and travail of birth. Simply, her time was come and she brought forth her Son. Mary and every mother among us would agree with Jesus’s words. “When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world” (John 16:21).

Joy! The Son of the Highest is born! Gabriel’s words were fulfilled. Isaiah’s prophecy had come true. “For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder . . . he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Isa. 9:6-7; Luke 1:32-33).

The first human beings to hear the glad tidings from the angel were simple shepherds. How appropriate to a story

through which the thread of humility is continuously woven. The shepherds were excited to hear the glad tidings. They hurried to Bethlehem, saw for themselves, and told the marvelous story to everyone they could. Anna talked about Jesus, the shepherds did, John the Baptist did. Is the story any less wonderful for us? Why do we choose to stay silent? Do we have to hear a great host of angels praising and glorifying God from the skies before we are impressed to tell the glad tidings to others?

In Jerusalem, there lived a dear old saint, righteous before his fellow men and devoted to God. He had been promised that he would see the Christ before he died. How many years had he waited, believing, trusting, anticipating that glorious experience? One day, directed by the Holy Spirit, Simeon came to the temple just at the time that Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to present Him to the Lord. We think of the baby Jesus in a manger cradle. Picture Him being tenderly cradled in Simeon's arms, received, embraced, and adored. O come let us adore Him; embrace Him in the wonderment of His love for us. Simeon blessed God and, in words of praise, painted for us a miniature picture of salvation. When our spiritual eyes are opened to see (comprehend and receive) the salvation of the Lord, we can spend our days and leave this world with the incomparable peace of God in our hearts (Luke. 2:29-32). Quoting from the prophet Isaiah, Simeon refers to Jesus's ministry: "Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee . . . and the Gentiles shall come to thy light" (Isa. 60:1, 3).

Joseph and Mary marveled at the words Simeon spoke about their little Son. They marveled, were amazed, and understood Him not to the end of their lives. Simeon spoke a word of prophecy to Mary, and a brief aside concerning her own heartache to come (Luke 2:34-35; Isa. 8:14).

At that moment appeared a lovely lady of great age who served God in the temple night and day with prayers and fasting, giving thanks and speaking of Jesus to all who looked for redemption. The sight of her and the sound of her prayers of praise and thanksgiving must have warmed Mary's heart.

What an encouragement to us is this lovely woman. Some of

us may feel we are no longer useful—to God, or anybody. For reasons of age, or physical condition, limitations of strength or mobility, we feel that our days of serving are over. Lord willing, all of us will be old someday, and these years could be the most glowingly productive and spiritually prosperous of our lives. We have this inspiring example of an eighty-four-year old woman who ceaselessly served God. She was a widow, probably not wealthy. Nevertheless, she served God richly as she prayed and fasted and talked about the Christ.

Think of Anna. Think of Elizabeth. God has a particular purpose for each of us which is not limited by our age or condition or circumstances. However He has called us to serve Him is a high calling. I can achieve nothing greater in my life than to know and do God's will.

We know little about the life of Jesus before He began His public ministry, and yet we know much. Consider the implications of these few words: “And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon Him” (Luke 2:39-40).

Mary and Joseph were godly parents who were conscientious to keep the ceremonial law of the Lord (2:21-24) as well as the civil law (2:1-5). They provided a healthful environment for Jesus which met His physical needs.

He grew strong in spirit. This refers to His own personality and inner being. They provided for His human emotional needs, developing confidence and self-worth. (If this sounds too “human,” remember, Jesus was man. He emphasized again and again that He was the Son of man and we must somehow understand that, although He was God, He was yet man.)

He was filled with wisdom. Proper emphasis was placed on good and sound knowledge and intellectual development, good judgment, responsibility. His parents had the wisdom of the Proverbs for a guide, as we do. The grace of God was upon Him. He grew spiritually, the parents sharing with Him all the knowledge of God and Scripture that they possessed.

Jesus lived in a home where roles were understood and properly filled—parents in authority and children in subjection, and not the reverse as we so often see today. His was a home where love and respect were taught (2:51). In this environment, Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man (2:52).

We may assume that as Jesus grew physically and mentally, from babyhood to childhood to adulthood, that He grew in the realization of who He was. This is confirmed in the account of the temple experience when He was twelve. The doctors were astonished, His parents were amazed, and even we wonder at His words. “Do you not know I must be about my Father’s business?” They did not know that they were witnessing fulfillment of a prophecy. “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord” (Isa. 11:1-2).

He knew somehow that He was the Son of God, for he grew from a small child with a gradual awakening to and awareness of Himself, His purpose, His destiny, as no other child ever has. They knew not, but in some mysterious way would not He have known, even then, that His Father’s business would finally take Him to the cross?

At what point in physical development does a person become spiritually aware? This time can and should be in early childhood. Parents should begin to sing, to talk, to read to their children about God, Jesus, and the Bible when they are babies. As soon as covenant children can relate to right and wrong, they should be told about Jesus the Savior.

The final words about Jesus bring to a conclusion all we know of His life until He was about thirty years old. “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (2:52). We might paraphrase this verse by saying that Jesus developed intellectually and physically, spiritually and socially. This supplies a good example for our own development, and we would do well to use it for a pattern, setting personal goals for advancement in

each of these areas. It is easy to become complacent with what and where we are when we could be honoring God more by improving the quality of these areas of our lives. We will not do this faithfully and effectively unless we set realistic and specific goals with set times for their accomplishment. Intellectual goals could include reading books; taking courses of instruction; attending lectures, visiting museums and exhibits. Most of us have need for more physical discipline. How many of us exercise as we should? Are we eating properly? Are there ways we could improve our physical appearance?

Spiritual development comes from disciplined, consistent practice of prayer, Bible reading, study and memorization and personal application of what we learn from Scripture through private and corporate worship. Reading Christian books is useful, and learning from Christians who are older and wiser than we are contributes to our growth.

And finally we have a challenge to develop ourselves socially. At least two applications can be made in this area. First, we can hone and develop character and personality that deserves the respect and favor of those who know and observe us. Second, we can cultivate new friends, nourish existing friendships, and minister with our presence and attentiveness to any who may need fellowship.

Our most important lesson from this verse, however, is simply that we must value the favor of God before that of other people. Although it is good to want to be honored and respected by other people we must always remember that the favor of others is worthless and even dangerous if we do not first have the favor of God.

Woven all through the fabric of Jesus's earthly life as told in Luke's gospel are threads of love and compassion; peace and power and promises; wisdom and authority and grace; wonder and mystery; forgiveness and forbearance; pain and joy.

The anticipation and appearance of the heavenly visitor were marked by praise hymns and joy songs and glory words. Poetry of thanksgiving poured out. Luke alone records five hymns of praise which have identifying names. In order of appearance

they are: The Beatitudes (“Blessed are you” 1:42-45, Elizabeth); The Magnificat (“My soul magnifies the Lord,” 1:46-55, Mary); Benedictus (“Blessed be the Lord God,” 1:68-79, Zacharias); Gloria in Excelsis (“Glory to God in the highest,” 2:14, the angels); and Nunc Dimittis (“Now you are letting your servant depart,” 2:29-32, Simeon).

Although often out of sight in the events to come, the shining thread of joy is still present and it splendidly resurfaces at the end of the story.