



1 In the previous sermon, I stated that Luke's Gospel is grounded in evidence and facts, and that Luke seeks to explain what faith truly is. He wants to demonstrate that Jesus will indeed come and be our King in the future. This is not merely a good story — it is an objective reality.

PRIEST

2 (Luke 1:5)

"In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth."

2.1 King Herod ruled over Judea—which included Samaria and Galilee—between 40 and 4 B.C. In (Matthew 2:1) the text says:

"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem."

Here we see confirmation of his reign during that time.

2.2 The text goes on to say that there was a certain priest from the division of Abijah, named Zechariah.

But what exactly does "from the division of Abijah" mean? If we look at 1 Chronicles, it is written there that during the time of King David, the priestly line was divided into divisions. One could only be a priest if he came from the line of Aaron, from the tribe of

Levi (Aaron was the brother of Moses). Aaron's descendants were divided into 24 divisions, and the division of Abijah was the eighth in order.¹

2.3 The Levites, from the tribe of Levi, performed other duties in the Temple—they cleansed the Temple, sang in the choir, prepared it for the ceremonies, and so forth.

But one could only be a priest if he was from the line of Aaron.

2.4 The text further tells us that Zechariah's wife Elizabeth was also from the descendants of Aaron. This means that both parents of John the Baptist came from a priestly lineage — and that is not an insignificant detail.

RIGHTEOUS BEFORE GOD

3 (Luke 1:6)

"They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord."

3.1 Here Luke tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God and lived blamelessly according to God's Law and commandments.

3.1 There are two basic views on this question, or more precisely, two ways in which Christianity most commonly explains how a person is justified before God.

Here I will focus on the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant perspectives.

3.2 In its basic form, Protestant theology teaches that no one has ever been able to keep God's moral law perfectly.

That is precisely why Christ came as the perfect sacrifice, so that those who believe in him might be justified before God and receive eternal life as a gift.

The key word here is *justified*.

If we read the passage in (§3) through the lens of Protestant theology, we are left with two options: either to overlook it or to begin questioning it. Why? Because at that time Zechariah and Elizabeth did not know Jesus—he had not yet been born. In other words, according to this understanding, they had no way of being justified.

3.3 The Catholic and Orthodox traditions, on the other hand, emphasize Christ's sacrifice, the sacramental life, and a life of obedience to God. The question that naturally follows is this: what role do these outward rites actually play? The problem with relying on external rituals is something I will explain later in the sermon.

3.4 If it was impossible to keep God's moral commandments, how then do we read that Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God? When we carefully study Scripture,

¹ 1 Chronicles 24:1–18

we do not find the biblical authors explicitly stating that the Mosaic Law is impossible to uphold.

3.5 The truth is that none of us loves our neighbor as ourselves. We are morally imperfect beings, who will always first take care of our own needs. The very core—the essence—of the Law of Moses, which is moral goodness, we can never fully achieve.

PURPOSE OF THE LAW

4 The Law was given to the Jews so that they might recognize who they truly are, and through that recognition be led to repentance and to the realization that they need the grace of God.

4.1 Let me place myself in the shoes of a Jew. What does it truly mean to keep God's commandments? If I desired to keep the Mosaic Law, I first had to believe that God had made a covenant with my people, Israel. That meant taking His Law seriously — devoting myself to worship, to the study of the Torah, to knowing God. I would love His Law because I know what I am — and because I know that only God can save me from myself.

4.2 When the Law revealed to me that I was not a good person — yet I sincerely desired to become one — I would come to the temple with the sacrifices prescribed in the Law, with a repentant heart. The ritual was not a means of earning favor, but an acknowledgment of my need for mercy.

4.3 I believe this is what Zechariah and Elizabeth were doing. They did not keep the Law because they “had to.” They loved it. Their ceremonies were not performances; they were expressions of a humble and repentant heart.

4.4 But not everyone saw it this way. Many kept the Law with a distorted understanding. They believed that by doing so they were earning God's favor: “God, do You not want me to receive what I deserve? I fast, I offer sacrifices, I pray, I live according to Your laws. I am not like others. I deserve Your blessing.”

4.5 Can ritual change the heart? Can a man simply decide to become good? No.

4.6 Scripture teaches that the core of our being is morally corrupted. Both the Old and New Testaments testify that we cannot earn God's favor. We are saved by grace — it is a gift. The Law exposes our need; grace is God's answer.

A SAD REALITY IN OUR LIVES

5 When we apply this to ourselves, we must admit something painful: there is pride in our hearts that resists grace. We do not want a gift — we want to earn it.

5.1 I see this in my own life. And I see it in our Christian circles — whether Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant. The same pride, the same desire to feel morally superior.

5.2 We have our rituals and systems. And they can easily become tools of self-righteousness.

ROTTEN WITHIN

6 In the days of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ, the Pharisees did the same. They taught that keeping the Law earned God's favor. Jesus and the apostles strongly opposed this.

6.1 Paul warns that ceremonies do not justify us. They are meant to reflect a repentant heart — not to purchase grace.²

6.2 The Pharisees, however, desired to appear righteous. They walked through the marketplaces, boasting in their fasting and prayers. It mattered more to them how they appeared before people than who they truly were before God.



6.3 That is why Jesus said to them, “You are like whitewashed tombs — outwardly beautiful, but inwardly full of corruption.” Outwardly flawless. Inwardly filled with envy, pride, and deceit. They had become righteous only in their own eyes.”³

6.4 This Pharisaical mindset did not remain in the first century. It is universal. It crosses cultures, centuries, and denominations.

6.5 The Jews could take the Law seriously and walk righteously before God. They could not keep it perfectly, but the sincere desire to keep it — combined with a repentant heart — made them righteous in God's sight. Only a few truly lived this way. Zechariah and Elizabeth were among them.

6.6 And this is why today both Catholics and Protestants may contain elements of truth in their theology. Yet when the heart of the matter — repentance and humility before God — is lost, doctrine can easily be distorted and turned into a system of merit.

6.7 For this reason, I believe that Luke intentionally introduces Zechariah and Elizabeth at the very beginning of his Gospel. They are not examples of people who believed they could earn God's favor. Rather, they are examples of people who loved God, loved His

² Galatians 3:1–3; Romans 2:25, 28–29; 3:28; Philippians 3:2–3

³ Matthew 23:27

Law, and sought His mercy with repentant hearts. That is precisely why Luke says that they were righteous before God.

THE LOT

7 Alright, let us continue. In (Luke 1:7) we read that Elizabeth was barren:

"But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years."

7.1 In (Genesis 30:22–23) it says:

"Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, 'God has taken away my disgrace.'"⁴

The text goes on to say that both Zechariah and Elizabeth were advanced in years. This theme repeats itself as in the Old Testament—Abraham and Sarah were also old before they received Isaac.

7.2 (Luke 1:8)

"Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division,"

7.3 Most likely, the 24 divisions (§2.2) rotated among themselves in order to serve in active priestly duty in Jerusalem. While one division was serving in active duty, the others lived with their families in their own towns and villages. When their turn came for active service, they had to leave their homes and families and go to Jerusalem to serve in God's Temple for a set period of time.

7.4 Here Luke tells us that Zechariah was serving in such a duty at that moment.

7.5 (Luke 1:9)

"According to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense."

The text further tells us that Zechariah was chosen by lot for a special service.

⁴ In Luke 1:25, we see Elizabeth saying the same thing.



The Temple was surrounded by outer walls, like a fortress. Inside those walls were two large courtyards in the shape of a square, separated by a massive wall and a gate of passage.

7.6 In the first courtyard were the women, who were not permitted to enter the second area where the men gathered. There the sacrifices were offered, and the priests carried out their service. That space was separated by a low wall, and the men observed the proceedings from a distance.

Behind the altar were steps leading into the temple itself, which contained two rooms. The first room had a large opening without doors, allowing the Jews outside to see within.

The second chamber was separated by a large curtain and was called the Most Holy Place. Only one priest—the one chosen by lot—was permitted to enter. There, he would offer incense before the Lord.

7.7 The lot fell to Zechariah. But why a lot?

Here I will offer a personal reflection. If a priest failed to perform the service properly, the consequences could be severe. To offer incense in the Holy of Holies was both the highest honor and the greatest responsibility.

In other words — you had better do it correctly.

Surely no priest took lightly the thought of standing before the Lord. Some may even have thought, “Let someone else go today.” And so—the lot was cast.

ENCOUNTER WITH THE ANGEL

8 (Luke 1:11–12)

"And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him."

8.1 We read that Zechariah was terrified. The angel most likely appeared in the form of a man. In verse 19 we see him introduce himself by name: Gabriel.⁵

⁵ In Daniel 8:15–17 we also read that Gabriel appeared in the form of a man: "When I, Daniel, had seen the the voice of a man between the banks of the Ulai, and he called out and said, 'Gabriel, give this man an understanding of the vision.' So he came near to where I was standing, and when he came I was frightened and fell on my face; but he said to me, 'Son of man, understand that the vision pertains to the time of the

The name Gabriel appears once more in Luke.



8.2 Why was Zechariah afraid? Imagine being a priest offering incense in the Holy of Holies—the space where no one is allowed to enter except you—and suddenly a man appears, ready to speak with you. Would you not be frightened? I certainly would!

8.3 (Luke 1:13–14)

"But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.'"

8.4 We read that the angel says to Zechariah, "Your petition has been heard."

Which petition?

Later in the text, the angel tells him that his wife Elizabeth will bear a son. Most likely, the prayer of Zechariah and Elizabeth was precisely that — that they might have a child.

8.5 But we must ask: was Zechariah praying that specific prayer at that very moment while offering incense? I do not know. I am inclined to believe he was not. Why? Because the text clearly states that they were advanced in years. After many years of praying for a child, perhaps they eventually said to themselves, "It is evident that God will not grant this request."

8.6 And here I want to emphasize something: because they were righteous before God, they continued to worship and serve Him — even though He had not given them a child. In their hearts they had said, "Your will be done, O Lord."

I believe this is exactly why Luke calls them righteous. They did not love God for what they could get from Him, but for who He is.

8.7 Then the angel says, "You will have joy and gladness."

end." vision, I sought to understand it; and behold, standing before me was one who looked like a man. And I heard

I believe this refers first to a deeply personal joy — the joy between Zechariah and Elizabeth, who now receive what they had long desired. Yet even more than that, it is the joy of realizing that God had never forgotten their prayer.

SPIRIT OF TRUTH

9 (Luke 1:15)

"For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb."

9.1 We read that many will rejoice at his birth and that he will be great in the sight of the Lord. The angel is saying, "You, as parents, will have extraordinary joy — but not only you. All Israel will rejoice."

9.2 Before which Lord will John be great? Jesus Christ had not yet appeared publicly, so in Zechariah's mind "the Lord" meant Yahweh — the God of Israel. If I am correct, the angel is declaring that John will be great before Yahweh Himself.

9.3 We are told that he will drink no wine or strong drink. These instructions reach back to the time of Moses. In those days, some children were dedicated to the Lord for special service — they were called Nazirite.⁶

9.4. Then we read: "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb."

What does that mean?

John performed no miracles. He did not heal the sick or raise the dead. Yet prophets in the Old Testament did such things. So in what sense was John great before the Lord?

What does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit?

9.5. In John's Gospel we often encounter the phrase "the Spirit of truth," and I believe this is what Luke is emphasizing. From the very beginning, John was open to truth. He sought God's revelation passionately and understood what had been given to him — in accordance with the Scriptures and the revelation available to him.

9.6. John had prophetic insight that the Messiah was coming. But he did not yet grasp the full picture — that the Messiah must suffer, die, rise again, and return to establish His kingdom. He had part of the revelation, but not the fullness we possess today.

9.7. The difference between John and us is that rebellion against truth did not hinder him. He was filled with the Spirit of truth from the womb. He possessed remarkable understanding of who God is and what God was doing. His entire life was devoted to that truth.

⁶ The outward symbols by which they were recognized are described in (Numbers 6:1–8)

9.8. Jesus Himself said that among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John.

We see the same power of the Spirit of truth in the life of Jesus from childhood — for example, when He remained in the temple for three days, speaking with the teachers. All were amazed at His understanding.⁷

9.9. This is crucial to understand: the New Testament speaks of different gifts of the Spirit, yet there is one Spirit. There are gifts of teaching, preaching, prophecy, and service.

But before any gift can operate, something must happen first — we must receive the Spirit of truth. Eyes to see. Ears to hear. Understanding.

That “aha” moment when we recognize, “This is truth — the only truth.”

The Spirit of truth uses our entire life — our upbringing, experiences, mistakes, decisions — to open our hearts. And then we begin to understand why we are here, who God is, and what His plan is.

With that realization comes decision — personal surrender.

We submit our lives, desires, passions, and convictions to His Son, Jesus Christ.

He becomes our Teacher.

And then we realize that we have received an extraordinary gift.

And that fills us with deep joy.

⁷ Luke 2:47