

ChristmasPortents 19-12-22a

Welcome to the Sunday morning services at Grace and Truth Bible Church. This is December the 22nd 2019 and we're going to do a holiday observance special this morning from Luke chapter 1. You can be turning to Luke chapter 1 and in the light of our recent study on end times and the expectation, anticipation, and signs of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ for us at the rapture and then for His people at the second coming and looking at the preceding events, the conditions and the surrounding circumstances. It seemed apropos that at this season where we celebrate Christ's first coming to look at those circumstances, those leading up incidents, what was the, in fact I think Dr. Griswold has a sermon titled, What was the news the day before Christmas? And so we're going to take a look at that from Luke chapter 1 as our opening passage and so we'll ask God's blessing on our fellowship and on our study and then we'll begin.

Father, we are so grateful for your grace and your faithfulness toward us. You have not left us as orphans as the Lord Jesus said but have gifted us with the Holy Spirit with the wonderful information contained in your word and with the Spirit's presence the ability to understand it and to see its pertinence and applicability in our own lives. We pray that as we look at this portion of your word together this morning in celebration of the Lord Jesus' first coming that God the Holy Spirit will bless it to each heart, that we will find ourselves refreshed and renewed in this season where it can happen that we are easily distracted or caught up in the details of the celebration and we miss the most important event of all of human history which we celebrate at this time.

We pray that our fellowship and our study will reflect the glory of the Lord Jesus and come before your throne as a sweet-smelling savor. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen. Well, the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ had been foreseen by the prophets in the Old Testament day.

We've seen those prophecies many times and in many books. Most recently I think Daniel chapter 9 with the prophecy of the 70 weeks and that 70th week being yet future after the 69 weeks comes Messiah the Prince. And so we looked at the timing of that and I again suggest that perhaps we have misidentified in traditional Christianity the decree that began that clock ticking because it is something of a hidden decree.

You have to look for it. It's easy to see the formal notations that send various groups back to the land to rebuild the walls, to begin to rebuild the temple. But to restore and rebuild Jerusalem is the detail.

And Jerusalem is not just a city, it is a population. And to restore and rebuild the dwelling place for the people is what is in view in my observation. And the whole book of Esther devoted to the decree that gives the Jewish people, by that time they are Jewish, post-exile, post-exilic, gives them autonomy.

It's the first time that they are given autonomy as a population to not only go and build and work. They have been working and building for others since their days in Egypt. Clear back to the days when Isaac kept having to re-dig wells because others were taking them over.

And then building in Egypt and working as slaves in Babylon and later in Persia. But with the decree in Esther's day, they have autonomy to their possessions, to their homes, to their ancestral land, the ability to defend it, to the ability even to fight for it and defend it at the cost of the lives of the attackers. So from that decree, counting forward in a very straightforward fashion, the requisite number of years for 69 sevens, you come to the first appearance of the Lord Jesus in the first decade of the new era that we count as AD, Anno Domini, the year of our Lord.

And at the age of 12, this is when the Messiah is introduced. But there is a preceding introduction. And for those who are watching, they saw it ahead of the formal revelation.

And this is our Christmas story. These are the shepherds, the wise men. But it begins in Luke chapter 1. The very first hint, the very first clue that the time has come is introduced by the same angel who told Daniel how long it would be.

The last appearance of Gabriel in the Old Testament is in the book of Daniel. And the first appearance of Gabriel chronologically in the New Testament is in Luke chapter 1. So Gabriel himself is the one who gives the prophecy and then who announces the fulfillment of the prophecy to Zechariah. The title you might give to this morning's study is, Before His Coming.

What happened before His coming? And let's read this together and then I'd like to point out a few details. So Luke chapter 1, Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus. Of course, Theophilus is sort of a descriptive name, theos being God and philos being the word for love.

This is the word that is used for brotherly love as in Philadelphia. So someone who loves God, Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed. The certainty of those things in which you were instructed.

It has been told to you, but here is an orderly account that you can go back and refer to. And of course, Daniel was told to write down the prophecy he received from Gabriel in a book and to seal it up until the time of the end. And there are portions of Daniel that are easily perceived, easily understood, and there are other parts, I think, that are opaque until the time of the end.

But you will notice that Theophilus is already a believer. This is not an account that is designed to evangelize. It is designed to reinforce a teaching and a faith that is already in existence.

We are reminded of what John says in John chapter 20. There are many things you could write

about the Lord Jesus, but these in John's gospel are written that you might believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that believing you might have life through His name. And this is more than just saving faith, altering our destiny from the lake of fire to God's future kingdom, but it is life and the more abundant life.

I've come that they might have life and have it more abundantly. These are written that you can have faith, that you can trust God through these accounts of the life of the Lord Jesus, the words of the Lord Jesus, the example of the Lord Jesus, and in that faithing, in that observation and trust, have life through His name. So as we continue now in the account, we have the beginning of this incursion.

There has been silence. There have been no prophets. There have been no angelic visitations.

There have been no widely noised abroad signs from God for centuries. Now we know that there has been individual communication from God to certain believers. We know Simeon, for example, received a message from God that he would not leave his earthly life until he had seen God's salvation for Israel.

But these were rare and it seems to be private. It wasn't widely noised abroad. Simeon evidently talked about this later, which is why we have it in the post-birth account.

But what's interesting is we have much granularity in the description of this birth of John the Baptist in Luke 1. So it continues in verse 5. There was in the days of Herod the king of Judea a certain priest named Zechariah of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron and her name was Elizabeth. They were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. So it was that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zechariah saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Zechariah

said to the angel, How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.

The angel answered and said to him, I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you, and bring you these glad tidings. But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their own time. And the people waited for Zechariah, and marveled that he lingered so long at the temple.

But when he came out, he could not speak to them, and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them, and remained speechless. So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house. Now after these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and she hid herself five months, saying, Thus the Lord has dealt with me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.

Then following that, you have in the sixth month, the angel Gabriel being sent to Galilee, to Nazareth, to speak to Mary. But let's begin here at the beginning, and take note of a few things. The first announcement is not to someone like Saul of Tarsus, struck down on the road saying, The Messiah is about to start his ministry, and I want you to go before him and announce that he's here.

You could imagine, if you were making up the first advent plan, if we got together as a committee, you always get better plans with a committee, don't you? To figure out how to introduce the Lord Jesus to the people, that it could have been a Damascus Road experience, John could have been full grown, and have been diverted to suddenly make this announcement, and to start baptizing at the Jordan, and here comes Jesus, and the story picks up at that point. So the first question we can ask ourselves is, why all of this fuss at the birth? The actual introduction of the Messiah, and the coming to his own, so that his own can receive him, and enter into the blessings of the kingdom, is 30 years hence, 31 years hence, or more. So why does God begin decades before the big event? Why is it that we make much of the birth? Because there are going to be many silent years after this account, before these two men begin their God-given assignments.

John, to prepare the way, and the Lord Jesus to present himself as the Messiah, and the kingdom that God promised to Israel as a potential at that time. So why all the fuss about the birth, and why is there this set of events, and then there is just silence? Well, this begins with an echo, and a harking back to Old Testament truth. The Old Testament canon has been finished, it has been recognized, it has been gathered together.

There is a set of scrolls recognized as divine scripture, ever since post-exilic days. It is thought that Ezra was one of the final authorities to compile, and to sort of set in stone the inspired books of the Old Testament. Some people believe he did some heavy editing on some of them.

I don't think so, but I wouldn't doubt that in his role in the return to Jerusalem, that worship

and preservation of the old scrolls, the law, the writings, and the prophets could have been begun under his care. And the beginning of scribal function in reading and interpreting, as it is done first in his day. To render it into the language of the people, to explain the old biblical Hebrew in modern language, much as we have had to explain the King James English in earlier days.

So, in harking back to the Old Testament, this is a known authority. There is no question, when Jesus is arguing with the Pharisees, and he says, does it not say in your scriptures, and the scriptures cannot be broken. And everybody is nodding their head, yes, the scriptures cannot be broken.

Jesus says, you search the scriptures, because in them you think that you are going to find life, and here I am, I am the fulfillment of it. Why can't you make that connection? So, in looking at those scriptures, we see these details. First of all, in the days of Herod the King of Judea, and we know that Herod's time began in earlier days, and ended in 4 B.C. So, this is one time note.

And even in saying Herod the King of Judea, you are immediately thinking back to the Old Testament scriptural days, where there were kings in Judah. And that God was active in the days of those kings. You think of Josiah, and you think of Hezekiah, and you think of the good kings, and then you think of all of the bad ones.

But Herod came to power as the governor or king of Judea in 37 B.C. And his time as king in Judea ends in 4 B.C. When you subtract 4 from 37, what do you get? 33. How old was the Lord Jesus when He left? 33. So, you have the sort of non-God ordained, non-anointed king of Judea in power for 33 years.

The actual king is going to come and dwell in the kingdom for 33 years. So, with that, it says that there is this priest named Zechariah of the division of Abijah. His wife is of the daughters of Aaron.

Interesting note here, because his wife is of the daughters of Aaron. But here's your Bible trivia quiz question. The daughters of Aaron, this goes all the way back to Aaron the priest.

Aaron the brother of Moses, the Levite, the father of all priests, right? Here's your question. I'll give you five seconds. What was Aaron's wife's name? I could do the little Jeopardy time music.

Elizabeth. Elisheva is Aaron's wife's name. You find this in Exodus chapter 6 verse 23.

Elisheva, Elizabeth, as it's rendered into Greek and then into English. Now, while we're on the subject of Aaron, who was Aaron's sister? Mary, Miriam. Miriam comes down as Mary.

So, Aaron's wife is Elizabeth, his sister is Mary. And who are the two ladies that are going to figure in these first chapters of Luke? Elizabeth and Mary. So, you have a wonderful inclusio here in terms of referencing back.

Those who want to see an orderly account are going to see God's working at the beginning of the nation of Israel. Not the people of Israel, which goes clear back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But the nation begins in the days of Moses and is going to come to fulfillment in the days of Yeshua.

It starts with the law and it ends with the conquest, right? So, not accidental that of all possible names that these two ladies could have and the notice that they are relatives, they both have Levitical Aaronic family names. Elisheva and Miriam. So, we're told that she is of the daughters of Aaron and because she is a relative of Mary, there's a strong suggestion that Mary herself is from the tribe of Levi or certainly has antecedents in that direction.

It wasn't required that Levites marry within the tribe, but it certainly strengthened their priestly connection to have done so. And this is what Zechariah did. His wife is from the same tribe that he is.

So, they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. Their practice is blameless, but we see that Zechariah is going to have a little problem and a gentle rebuke because his faith isn't quite up to his practice. He's doing well, but when it comes to believing, he falls a little short and he's going to end up being unable to speak as a result.

And verse 7 says, But they had no child because Elizabeth was barren. Barren. Once again, an Old Testament notion comes to our mind.

We know that there were other women in this situation in the Old Testament. Can you think of them? Who's the first one you can think of, even before that? Sarah. Sarah is the first.

This is Genesis 18.11. And she shares, she and Abram share with Zechariah and Elizabeth the advanced age detail. And that's kind of an inclusio. You've got an elderly couple looking for a child and unable to bear because of this barrenness.

Who is the second one you can think of? You probably will miss this. I had to kind of shake my mental dust off here. It's Rebekah.

Rebekah, Genesis 25.21. And she's childless and then suddenly she's pregnant with twins. You've got Jacob and Esau, remember? But Rebekah, Genesis 25.21. The third is the one some of you mentioned, Hannah. This is 1 Samuel 1, 1 and 2. The fourth is... Well, actually, I skipped one.

Rachel. So in all three of your Abraham, Isaac and Jacob situations, you have barrenness overcome by God's grace. Rachel, and I missed that because I listed it out of order, is Genesis 29.31. So Rebekah is Genesis 25.21. Rachel is Genesis 29.31. So she's the third.

So Abram, Isaac and Jacob all had wives. Now, Leah had no trouble at all. She has four sons right out of the gate.

You've got Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah. It's just kind of a rapid fire family. Then you have Hannah, 1 Samuel 1, 1 and 2. And then the fifth is... Can you think of it? I'll give you hints in the book of Judges.

That's right. It's Mrs. Manoah. We're not given her name, but it's Mrs. Manoah.

Manoah's wife was barren. This is in Judges 13.2. So that's five prominent Old Testament examples. And we're still in the Old Testament age.

And so Elisheva, Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah, is our sixth strong biblical example and significant biblical example. So it was in verse 8, While he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense. This I find very significant because there are two elements involved in the timing and in the delivery of the message at this time.

There's a fixed element because these 24 courses of priests were established in the time of David and their service was resurrected and restored in the time of the second temple. When that temple is dedicated and built and priestly service resumes in Jerusalem, the 24 courses are re-established. And so the order of his division is sort of a steamroller.

It's an inevitability that these courses are going to rotate and it's fixed. It's like the days of the week or the months of the year. It is fixed and set and inalterable.

And so it comes that the course that Zechariah belongs to is in service. Within that, you have a lot of priests who are in the course. And so there is a sort of random element or seemingly random element where priests who are going to burn incense and have the privilege of going into the holy place to do so are selected by lot.

And the lot is, of course, thought to be guided by God, but nobody knows what it's going to be. You know when a course is going to serve, but you don't know which priest in that course is going to be in the Holy of Holies on any given day. It's selected by lot.

And it's only known a short time before. And so in the cycle of the courses, God ensures that Zechariah's course is serving or that Zechariah is in the course that will be serving at this time, and then that he is selected by lot. So there's the fixed element and the unknown element in view where his service comes.

Then it says in verse 10 that while he goes into the temple to burn this incense, and of course burning incense is associated with prayer. The altar of incense is specifically tied to the prayers of the saints in the book of Revelation. We've seen this before.

So with that, you have the presence of Zechariah in the holy place. And it says in verse 10, the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. At the hour of incense.

Psalms 141 verses 1 and 2 talk about prayer and incense. As I mentioned over in Revelation. Revelation 8, 34 for example.

But flip a few pages over to the other book that Luke wrote, which is the book of Acts. And look at chapter 3 verse 1. Acts chapter 3 verse 1. This is the famous case where Peter and John go to the temple and there's a lame man who appeals to them and he's healed. But look at verse 1. Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, which is when? What does it say? The ninth hour.

The ninth hour. So this is an evening offering of incense. This is in the afternoon.

This is in the vicinity of 3 p.m. This is the ninth hour. They started counting at 6 a.m. And so at the ninth hour, which is 3 p.m. What else do you know about the ninth hour? During the crucifixion, what takes place at the ninth hour? There was darkness from the sixth to the ninth hour. And that is the time when the Lord Jesus dismisses His Spirit and officially dies on the cross having completed the work of redemption.

So this is also the ninth hour. It is the time of the evening incense when the angel appears to Him standing on the right side. This is verse 11 now of Luke 1. An angel of the Lord appeared to Him standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

And like Zechariah, we're not initially given the identification. But He's standing at the right side. If you remember the architecture of the Holy of Holies, what do you see having walked in the entrance? You've gone past the altar of sacrifice.

You've gone past the brass laver outside. You've entered into the holy place. There are three major items that you see, items of furniture.

What are they? What's directly in front of you? The altar of incense which sits in front of the veil that leads to the most holy, the holiest place. You have an item of furniture on the left which is the lampstand, the golden lampstand. On the right, you have the table of showbread.

So Zechariah walks in. He has approached the altar of incense. It's not a gigantic room.

It's larger in the temple but still cozy. It's not an auditorium by any stretch. And he has approached the altar of incense to offer the incense.

And the angel appears on the right side. Which side is that? Is he sort of between the altar and the lampstand? Or is he between the altar and the table of showbread? In other words, is he at Zechariah's right or is he at the altar's right? Well, without going into detail on how I know this, it is the altar's right. Now, which is Zechariah's left.

So it's between the altar and the lampstand. So if it isn't enough that Gabriel is going to glow with heavenly glory, he is also illuminated by that seven-branched lampstand. He is right there.

It's the best-lit corner in the room. That's where he appears. Now, since we know that that's

where he was, what else can you say about that particular location? Think about what's on the other side of the veil or what should have been at the other side of the veil, but actually isn't in this day.

What used to be behind the veil in the first temple? You've got the Ark of the Covenant. What's on top of it? The mercy seat with the cherubim. And what sits above the cherubim and in their midst? The symbol of the presence of God, the glory of God, right? So, symbolically at least, the holiest place is the place of the presence of God.

Now, you wouldn't come in behind God if you entered through the veil, would you? If you entered through the veil, God would be facing you. So, is Gabriel standing at God's left hand or at God's right hand in symbolic terms? He's at God's right hand. So, from our perspective, it's like the American flag always is positioned at its own right.

Well, Gabriel is in that same position. He's, as you view the altar, he's on the left. Why is this important? And it would be difficult.

I would fail far more miserably than Zachariah did, I'm sure. But he need not fear a message coming from a messenger at God's right hand is probably going to be good news. The right hand of God is where the Lord Jesus is currently now seated.

The New Testament tells us this in three different places, that the Lord Jesus is seated at the Father's right hand where He ever liveth to make intercession for us as a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. Hebrews tells us this. We're told it in a couple of other places.

You see it in the book of Acts when the Lord Jesus stands to receive His faithful witness and martyr Stephen into glory. And Stephen says, I see the Lord Jesus standing at the Father's right hand. This is where Gabriel is.

So this is the right hand of God, good news that is coming. But understandably perhaps, when Zachariah sees him in verse 12, he's troubled and fear falls upon him. Because as yet, the angel has not spoken.

He just appears. You would imagine the rare privilege of being allowed to enter the holy place to perform this ministry. You could imagine that Zachariah's soul would be full of the significance and the meaning of it.

I don't know how many times in a lifetime with that many priests, one would have the lot fall on him and be able to do this. There was probably a special table at the restaurant for guys that had been honored with this particular function. And this is Zachariah's time.

And so he goes in and suddenly an angel appears and just, as we would say in the vernacular, just rocks his world. And he becomes afraid. This would startle you, understandably so.

So the angel said to him, do not be afraid, Zachariah. Your prayer is heard and your wife

Elizabeth will bear you a son. They have been praying for a son for years.

Evidently still praying, even though they're old. Because he doesn't say your long ago prayer. He said your prayer is heard and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you shall call his name John.

We're going to pause here and take our break, but I'll give you the question I ask myself at this point in the narrative. People name their kids all kinds of things. I've seen people name their daughter Miracle or Sky or their son, everything from Moon Unit to just all kinds of imaginative names referring to vegetation, to landscape features, to interstellar objects.

There's just all options open when you look down at your newborn and decide to affix a label, a name to them for life. But God picks the name here and I think he could have said Elijah. That's going to be his function.

He could have said Aaron because you've already got Elizabeth and Miriam in the works here. Why John? That's the question we're going to try to answer for ourselves after the break because of course this is the first of two divinely assigned names in this narrative account. You're going to have John and you're going to have Jesus.

Specified, no other name. This is the name God says you will name the child. Why is that? Well, we'll take a look at that and see if we can ascertain it after the break.