*DEVOTIONS*

November 21 - 26

*The Hope of Christ*

**Monday, November 21 Luke 1:1-4**

*“To reassure you of the truth of all you were taught”*

Luke tells us four things about his Gospel. (1) He has “investigated” the story. That is, he has followed it closely. He has taken a long and careful look at what he is about to tell us. (2) He went back to “the beginning.” This is why he starts his story with John the Baptist, the forerunner, who points to Jesus. (3) Luke was thorough, having studied “everything.” This is undoubtedly why there is so much fresh material in his account. About thirty percent of this Gospel is not found elsewhere. (4) Luke worked “carefully,” taking great care to develop his orderly account in a way that told the story clearly.

Luke then tells us that the purpose of his writing is to reassure Theophilus. As a Gentile finding himself in what had started out as a Jewish movement, Theophilus had probably come to Christ as a God-fearer – that is, a Gentile who first came to Judaism and then to Christ. Theophilus may not be entirely at home in his new community, especially if some of those he had previously allied himself with were denouncing this new sect of Christians to whom he belonged.

*Thank you, Holy Spirit, for this Gospel that teaches me about Jesus. Amen.*

**Tuesday, November 22 Luke 1:5-10**

*“Zechariah was serving God in the Temple”*

Luke begins his story by placing it in an established historical setting – the reign of King Herod the Great. Herod had done much building up of the nation, including the renovation of the temple in Jerusalem, receiving his commission from the Roman Mark Antony in 40bc and returning to Judea to rule under Roman oversight in 37bc.

In his goodness, God picks an important moment in the career of Zechariah to make his divine move. As a priest he served at the temple for two one-week periods a year. He was a member of one of twenty-four divisions, one of approximately 18,000 priests. A priest only officiated at the sacrifice once in his life, having been selected by lot.

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth have lived with deep disappointment, never having the child they long for – what Elizabeth will later call a “disgrace” (verse 25). Both are “upright” people, and their situation is thus not the result of personal sin. Sometimes righteous people do have disappointments in life.

*I will serve you, Lord, even in the midst of disappointment. Amen.*

**Wednesday, November 23 Luke 1:11-17**

*“An angel of the Lord appeared”*

The angel appears as Zechariah places the incense on the altar. At this high moment, God begins to work in a fresh way to redeem humankind by revealing his sending of the forerunner of the One who will take sin away from the world. How appropriate to pick a moment of worship and a time when people recognized their need for cleansing from sin!

God’s plan in the Old Testament had Israel at its hub. She would be the “model people” through whom God would show his grace. The birth of John the Baptist is similar to other births to formerly barren wives or other announcements of the birth of a special child. Telling the story in this manner indicates that God has renewed his work among his people. The special place that John has in God’s plan is shown in the ascetic lifestyle he will live, like other special people of God who took vows to show their devotion to God. Gabriel notes that John will have the responsibility to “go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah” and will “bring back [the people of Israel] to the Lord their God.”

*As you were 2,000 years ago, Lord, you are still at work in the world today. Amen.*

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**Thursday, November 24 Isaiah 40:1-5**

*“Prepare the way for the Lord”*

Isaiah sees a day when God’s servants will be crushed under the burden of their sins. They will feel sure that all is lost and that all the promises of God have been nullified by their rebellion. But the message to be proclaimed to them is that this is not so. Their years of exile in Babylon are not meant to destroy them but only to punish them. Now that punishment is complete and God has a word of hope for them, a word brought with tenderness and providing comfort to God’s people.

There is a “highway” in the “desert/wilderness” for our God. Since it is God who comes to helpless Israel to set her free, nothing must prevent his swift coming to his people’s aid, neither mountains nor valleys. The highway will be level and straight, so that God can come quickly, for there is no other hope for God’s people than God’s direct intervention. The New Testament sees John the Baptist as the one who, in the desert, prepares the way for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is Christ who will bring the hope of God’s salvation to the world.

*Thank you, Jesus, for coming into the world and bringing me hope. Amen.*

**Friday, November 25 Luke 1:18-22**

*“How can I know this will happen?”*

For many years Zechariah and Elizabeth have prayed to God and asked for a child, a prayer that the angel Gabriel declared having been heard and answered by God (see verse 13). Thus, this promised child will answer two prayers at the same time: for a child in the house of Zechariah, and for God to work his plan of redemption in the world. God often works simultaneously at the personal and at the universal level.

But Zechariah raises doubts about the angel’s message, for the prospective parents are now beyond normal childbearing age. Sometimes even good people have doubts about God’s promises. The angel tells Zechariah in effect, “Just be quiet for awhile and watch God work.” So a sign of silence is given until God performs his word. Zechariah becomes temporarily mute until these things come to pass. This sign is a pointer to the major lesson of the passage: God will bring his promise to pass. He will perform his word. Zechariah must listen to God and trust that he will do what he has promised.

*You have always been faithful to your promises, Lord, and I trust you. Amen.*

**Saturday, November 26 Luke 1:23-25**

*“How kind the Lord is”*

In Zechariah and Elizabeth we see not just historical figures but representative personalities, and we can identify with their responses to their life experiences. We can sympathize with Elizabeth’s plight of childlessness. But she also is an example in how she responds. Despite her personal disappointment, she faithfully serves God. And, when her prayer is answered, she rejoices in what God has done to renew her.

One thing neither Zechariah nor Elizabeth succumbed to was bitterness, even though Elizabeth felt disgrace. Maybe that is one reason God called them upright and blameless. As God’s children we need to learn to rely even more on our heavenly Father, for sometimes the answer to our disappointment is not clear. God never guarantees that life will come without pain and distress. The central issue is how we handle it. Bitterness will yield the fruit of anger and frustration, sapping the joy from life. Trust and dependence will cause us to find fulfillment and God’s peace.

*Your timing, Lord, though sometimes different from mine, is infinitely wiser. Amen.*