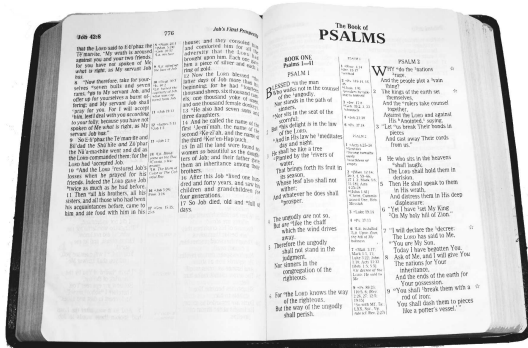


PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



January 2021

Bible readings from Isaiah chapters 54 to 66
Gospel of Luke chapters 1 and 2

Dear Friends,

I am writing this letter in April 2020 when millions are gripped with fear because of Covid 19. The testimony of John Ryland Jnr is an encouragement in such a situation and especially the last verse of the hymn quoted below. I have also found the closing chapters of Isaiah encouraging in these dark and uncertain times.

John Ryland's first wife, Elizabeth, died just a few weeks after her first child, The following day, a grief-stricken Ryland, with his motherless babe on his knee, wrote:

1. *Sovereign Ruler of the skies!*
Ever gracious, ever wise!
All my times are in Thy hand,
All events at Thy command.
2. *His decree, who formed the earth,*
Fixed my first and second birth;
Parents, native place and time,
All appointed were by Him.
3. *He that formed me in the womb,*
He shall guide me to the tomb;
All my times shall ever be
Ordered by His wise decree.
4. *Times the tempter's power to prove,*
Times to taste a Saviour's love:
All must come, and last and end,
As shall please my heavenly Friend.
5. *Plagues and deaths around me fly,*
Till He bids I cannot die:
Not a single shaft can hit
Till the God of love thinks fit.

We are not to be careless or presumptuous but it is a great blessing to know that though plagues and death are flying around us, we cannot die until the God of love thinks fit.

May you know the blessing of God upon you throughout the coming year.

Alec Taylor.

Key to notes

- All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version unless stated otherwise; they are printed in italics. **If you have a different translation of the Bible, you will still be able to use these notes.**
- The number in brackets eg. (6) refers to the verse number in the passage that we are reading; (23:16) refers us to another chapter and verse in the book of the Bible from which we are reading. When we read from Matthew, this would be Matthew chapter 23, verse 16.
- Where verses from other books of the Bible are brought to our attention, the name of the book is also indicated in the brackets eg. (Psalm 19:1).
- Where I ask you to compare another verse of Scripture, I prefix the reference with cp. (eg. cp. Psalm 1:1). I prefer this to the more common abbreviation cf. which relates to the obsolete word ‘confer’.

The word ‘Lord’ in the Old Testament

The Hebrew words translated ‘*Lord*’ are:

- ‘Adon’ which is used with reference to men (Genesis 42:33; 45:8–9), and with reference to God (Joshua 3:11,13; Psalm 8:1).
- ‘Adonai’ literally ‘my Lord’ (Exodus 4:10; Psalm 68:19).
- ‘Yahweh’ (‘Jehovah’), the sacred name for God, considered by many Jews as too sacred to utter. They regularly used ‘Adonai’ in its place. ‘Yah’ is a contracted form of ‘Yahweh’ (Isaiah 12:2; 26:4). The word ‘Alleluia’ or ‘Hallelujah’ (Revelation 19:1–6) means ‘Praise Yah’.

Dale Ralph Davis writes with reference to Exodus 3:12,14: ‘In light of verse 12, God does not here stress his being or existence so much as his presence and “Yahweh” captures and summarizes that thought – **he is the God who will be present to be all that his people need him to be.** “Yahweh” means the God who is present to help ... “Yahweh” is a personal name, while “the LORD” is a title ... there’s a devotional warmth in a personal name that a title can’t convey’ (THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS IN THE MUCK OF LIFE – PSALMS 1–12, page 8).

NB. Our Bible translators have made it possible for us to recognise when ‘Yahweh’ is used in the Old Testament. ‘Yahweh’ is printed ‘*LORD*’, whereas ‘Adon’ or ‘Adonai’ are printed ‘*Lord*’.

Enlarge the place of your tent

You may feel that I am mistaken in taking so many of the promises made to Israel to have their main fulfilment in the church of Christ. I feel that I am on solid ground however, and not just because I agree with the great commentator Matthew Henry. The first verse of this chapter is taken up in the New Testament as a promise for '*the Jerusalem above*' (the church). All these wonderful promises are for us because we '*are children of promise*' (Galatians 4:26–28). The church is viewed as a bride (1–10) and as a city (11–17), as it is in Revelation 21:9–10.

The church is now challenged to make known the gospel, gathering in God's chosen ones. Like Jerusalem, we may have been barren as a childless widow, but Christ did not die in vain for sinners. *He shall see the travail of his soul, and be satisfied* (53:11). We must have spiritual vision and expectation in our work for God who says, '*Enlarge the place of your tent ... lengthen your cords, and strengthen your stakes, for you shall expand ...*' (2–3). William Carey preached on these verses in Nottingham at a Baptist Association meeting in May 1792. He challenged his hearers, 'Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.' Carey went out to India as a missionary where he toiled for forty-one years and the Lord greatly blessed his labours. **Let us rise up to serve the Lord with faith and expectation and think BIG! We have a great God.** *Enlarge the place of your tent.*

Think about the precious promises that come tumbling out in verses 5 to 10. We belong to our Maker and we are wedded to him. The almighty, sovereign God has called us and had mercy on us. The new covenant brings us everlasting kindness and peace from God.

'For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but my kindness shall not depart from you, nor shall my covenant of peace be removed,' says the LORD, who has mercy on you.
 (Isaiah 54:10)

The heritage of the servants of LORD

God has not promised us that we will be free from suffering or persecution (cp. Matthew 5:11–12; 2 Timothy 3:12). There are more wonderful promises in these verses for the suffering church. Are you afflicted, tempest-tossed in your trial, and feeling comfortless (11)? Remember that God is too good to be unkind and he is with you in every trial (see verse 10). Your suffering is not for ever. Encourage yourself in the promises of God (cp. Romans 8:18). When the Lord Jesus comes again:

- We will be dazzling in our beauty like a city inlaid with precious stones (11–12).
- We will be taught by the Lord himself. We often think how wonderful it would have been to see and hear Jesus teaching in Galilee or Jerusalem, but we will see him and be taught by him in heaven.
- We will have great peace (13).
- We will be established in righteousness (never to sin again) and free from oppression and terror (14).

No weapon formed against us shall prosper. *This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD* (17). We have a glorious future and we owe it all to God. All our righteousness is from him. **Let us praise him and be encouraged to persevere through every battle and trial in the Christian life.**

*God shall alone the refuge be
And comfort of my mind;
Too wise to be mistaken, he,
Too good to be unkind.*

*When I the tempter's rage endure,
'Tis God supports my mind;
Too wise to be mistaken, sure!
Too good to be unkind.*

(Samuel Medley)

Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters

The appeal in this chapter was initially to the exiles in Babylon who were probably seeking satisfaction in material things but it has a far wider application. The first two verses of the chapter picture men and women thirsting and hungering for satisfaction. The chapter ends with a picture of great joy and freedom.

God is gracious and he invites sinners to himself (1–3). *‘Ho! (that is, ‘pay attention’) Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.’* He offers salvation freely *without money and without price* to all who will come to him. Notice that the invitation ‘come’ is found four times in (1,3). The Lord invites us, *‘Come to me, hear, and your soul shall live’* (3). We are invited to purchase without money! Salvation is free but it is costly! The Lord Jesus gave his own life to save us. This gracious invitation is repeated in the closing verses of the Bible, *‘Let him who thirsts come. And whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely’* (Revelation 22:17).

God promises the new covenant, *the sure mercies of David*, which comes through David’s greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He was given as a witness when God the Father raised him from the dead (Acts 13:34). The new covenant reaches to all nations throughout the world (5). This encourages us to make the gospel known.

Many, many thousands of people spend all that they have in the quest for satisfaction. They look for personal fulfilment in seeking for wealth, pleasure and all kinds of earthly comforts (cp. Ecclesiastes 2:1–11). Others turn to drug-induced experiences which lead them to disaster and misery. How terribly sad! There can be no lasting joy and peace apart from God (2). **Have you responded to the Lord’s invitation?** You will never find lasting satisfaction until you come to Christ for forgiveness of your sins and find peace with God. Jesus still says, *‘Come to me, hear, and your soul shall live’* (3).

If you are not a Christian, I urge you, ‘*seek the LORD while he may be found*’ (6). Tomorrow may be too late! What is involved in seeking God and coming to him? You must call upon him asking him to forgive your sin and to save you (6). You must forsake your sinful ways and thoughts if you want pardon from God (7). *God will have mercy and he will abundantly pardon*. Think of that! *He will abundantly pardon you because he delights in mercy* (Micah 7:18).

*Who is a pardoning God like thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?* (Samuel Davies)

God’s thoughts are far higher and different from those of men (8–9). He is wise and wonderful in all his thoughts and providential ways. We must remember this truth in every aspect of our Christian work. The Lord goes on to give us a lesson from nature to encourage us to persevere in our work for him. He gives rain and snow to water the earth so that seed will germinate, grow and produce a harvest (10). God says, ‘*So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish what I please and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it*’ (11). When he sends forth his Word, it will bring spiritual fruit.

A farmer does not expect to obtain a harvest without toil and patient waiting. In our work of evangelism and of building up our church, the same principles apply – toil and patient waiting before the harvest. Paul wrote, ‘*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase*’ (1 Corinthians 3:6). We must preach, teach and spread the Word of God trusting him to give the increase. God’s Word will accomplish his sovereign will – *it shall accomplish what I please* (11). We must neglect God’s Word to use gimmicks in our evangelism. **Let us trust in God whose thoughts and ways are different from those of men.** Just as the captives left Babylon with singing (12), we too shall rejoice in the Lord, when he is pleased to bless the work of our hands.

*Now, the sowing and the weeping
Working hard and waiting long;
Afterward, the golden reaping,
Harvest-home and grateful song.* (Frances Ridley Havergal)

The Lord GOD who gathers the outcasts

God's word for the captives returning from Babylon (55:12–13) was that they should be righteous and keep his Sabbath (1–2; cp. 58:13–14). **These verses surely look beyond this time to the world-wide church where the Sabbath is observed.** Alec Motyer summarises verses 1 to 8 as 'A world people, Sabbath people, praying people' and he points out that the Sabbath is 'at the centre of a world-wide, harmonious people' (COMMENTARY ON THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH, page 463). Obedience to God's Word is the grateful response to his grace and goodness in our lives.

There is also a message of hope for foreigners and eunuchs from *the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel* (8). The barbaric practice of mutilating men to make them eunuchs was common in the ancient world. Eunuchs and foreigners were excluded from the congregation of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:1–8). God promised that he would gather them to himself when they joined themselves to him to please and to obey him (3–6). He said, '*Even them I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer*' (7). Are you joyful in God's house? The Lord Jesus quoted verse 7 when he drove out the merchants from the temple (Matthew 21:13). These promises find their ultimate fulfilment in the gospel. Christ has broken down the barrier between himself and men and between Jew and Gentile (Galatians 3:26–29; Ephesians 2:11–18).

The Ethiopian eunuch came to faith in Christ while reading the prophecy of Isaiah (Acts 8:26–39). How thrilled he must have been as he progressed from chapter 53 to chapter 56 and saw these promises fulfilled in his own life! He went on his way rejoicing. The Lord Jesus saves all kinds of people, even the worst of sinners. He promises, '*The one who comes to me I will by no means cast out*' (John 6:37). If you are not a Christian and wonder whether God would receive you, be assured that if you come to Christ, trusting in him and repenting of your sin, he will accept you (Matthew 11:28–30). **He is a wonderful and gracious Saviour!**

The righteous perishes, and no man takes it to heart

There is a description here of a nation which had sunk into ignorance and gross darkness (perhaps in the reign of Manasseh; 2 Kings 21:1–16, by whom, according to Jewish tradition, Isaiah was martyred). How did such a dreadful situation come about? The leaders of the nation who should have given spiritual direction were blind, ignorant, lazy, greedy, selfish and drunken (56:10–12). The spiritual life was drained from the nation and sorcery, idolatry and wickedness flourished (57:3–9). When spiritual darkness prevails in a nation, *the righteous perishes, and no man takes it to heart; merciful men are taken away, while no one considers* (57:1). We live in difficult and confusing times when false religion and wickedness flourishes. **Let us pray much for our nation and that God will revive his churches. May God strengthen us and help us to persevere and trust in him.**

Sin is deceitful and it hardens the heart (Hebrews 3:13). The unfaithful Jews were wearied by their sinful ways but they refused to admit that there was no hope for those who lived in such a way. They would not take it to heart that they had forgotten God who promises blessing to those who trust in him (10–13).

*When nations are to perish in their sins,
'Tis in the church the leprosy begins;
The priest, whose office is, with zeal sincere,
To watch the fountain and preserve it clear,
Carelessly nods and sleeps upon the brink.
While others poison what the flock must drink;
Or, waking at the call of lust alone,
Infuses lies and errors of his own:
His unsuspecting sheep believe it pure;
And, tainted by the very means of cure,
Catch from each other a contagious spot,
The foul forerunner of a general rot.*

(From William Cowper's 'Expostulation' which draws parallels between faithless Israel and 18th-century England).

The High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity

The Lord promised the captives in Babylon that those who trust in him would return to their land and that he would remove every obstacle preventing their return to Israel. This came in sharp contrast to the useless idols which they had worshipped (13–14).

The Israelites were ignorant of the great character of God and Isaiah again proclaims his greatness (cp. 40:9–31). We are now given a glimpse of God in his awe-inspiring majesty. The words of verse 15 are wonderful: *For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit.'* Alec Motyer comments, 'The humble are those who know their rightful place is at the bottom, but the Lord does not purpose to leave people as he finds them' (COMMENTARY, page 466. These verses remind us that:

- The Lord is absolutely sovereign over the universe (cp. 40:21–23; Psalm 113:4–5).
- He is the eternal God who does not change (40:28; Malachi 3:6).
- Such a glorious, powerful God who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16) will dwell with those who have a humble and contrite spirit. What wonderful condescension!

*And will this sovereign King
Of glory condescend?
And will he write his name
My Father and my Friend?
I love his name, I love his word,
Join all my powers to praise the Lord.* (Isaac Watts)

God promises to restore the backslider (16–19). Let us pray for those known to us who have grown cold in their love for the Lord, who have strayed from him. If you are backslidden in heart, you know that you have returned to the ways of the wicked who are like the restless sea. *'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked'* (20–21). **You will never enjoy true peace until you humbly return to the Lord. Why continue in such a miserable state?**

Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD

The next two chapters contain rebukes and promises to the people of God. The Lord told Isaiah to cry aloud in rebuking his people for their sins (1). These were not those who had fallen into idolatry but those who appeared to be faithful to God. They prayed daily and worshipped Jehovah on high days and holy days. They delighted in fasting and in praying for justice (2), but they had a problem because God was not taking any notice of their devotions. *‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and you have taken no notice?’* (3).

What was wrong with these people who seemed to do everything right? Their lives did not match their profession. While they were observing their fasts, their minds were on their business affairs (*‘pleasure’*, 3) and they exploited their labourers. They quarrelled and fought each other and were wicked (3–5). Their religious ritual was a sham. God requires us to be just, full of compassion and humble and they were failing in these things (6–7; cp. Micah 6:8; Matthew 23:23).

Salvation cannot be earned by good works, but God’s blessings are conditional. Notice the word *‘If’* (9,13). If we remove oppression, the pointing of the finger (a sign of bitter contempt), and malicious talk from our lives, and have compassion on the needy, there are great promises for us. God will answer our prayers and give us light in darkness. He will guide us continually and will satisfy and strengthen us. He will make us like a watered garden and very fruitful (9–12).

There are blessings for those who delight in the Sabbath (13–14). I do not understand how some Christians can find the Lord’s Day a bore. It is a privilege to rest from our business, our work (*‘pleasure’*) and our hobbies, to take time to give our minds to spiritual things and to worship the Lord with his people. The day of rest is a blessing unknown to many Christians (cp. Mark 2:27). God promises those who delight in the Sabbath, *‘You shall delight yourself in the LORD’* (14). **Have you learned to delight in the Sabbath and in the Lord?**

Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened that it cannot save

If the people were tempted to think that God was powerless to help them, they had their answer in verse 1: *Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor his ear heavy that it cannot hear.* They may also have come to believe that God was deaf because he was not answering their prayers. He was not hearing them because their sins had alienated them from him. *Your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden his face from you* (2). God is not limited in his power, nor is he deaf. If, however, we cling to sin in our lives, he will not hear our prayers (cp. Psalm 66:18).

God goes on to present his case against the people. They were guilty of sinning with hands, lips, feet and in their thoughts:

- *Your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity* (3; cp. Romans 3:15–16).
- *Your lips have spoken lies, your tongue has muttered perversity. No one calls for justice, nor does any plead for truth. They trust in empty words and speak lies* (3–4).
- They were sinning in their thoughts. *They conceive evil and bring forth iniquity* producing deadly poison (4–5). *Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity* (7).
- *Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood ... wasting and destruction are in their paths* (7).

When sin is tolerated, there can be no peace in society (8). There is a detailed confession of sin in verses 9 to 15 – sins of injustice (9,11,14), falsehood, lying, departing from God and breaking his laws (13) and lack of truth. *Truth is fallen in the street* (14–15). The verses that we have read vividly describe the situation in which we live and that those who depart from evil become a target for evildoers. The Lord is not an indifferent observer of a nation's wickedness; he is displeased (15). Let us be determined with the help of God to lead lives which honour him. Let us also remember that God is still saving sinners (cp. 1 Corinthians 6:9–11). *The LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save.*

When the enemy comes in like a flood,

We live in evil times with a rising tide of wickedness and violence in our society, but we must never despair. When the situation is dark and helpless, the Lord comes in mighty power to deliver his people (16). He is pictured as a warrior clothing himself with armour for the battle (17; cp. Ephesians 6:13–17). *When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the LORD will lift up a standard against him* (19). The ESV has, ‘*The LORD... will come like a rushing stream*’ but Alec Motyer agrees that the words speak of the enemy rather than the Lord. He comments, ‘The adversary in question is all the opposition of sin and sinners ranged against the Lord and his people, but the Spirit turns to the attack, reducing the whole world to reverence and bringing redemption to Zion’ (COMMENTARY ON THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH, page 492).

There have been many times in the history of the church where wickedness has appeared to prevail and threaten the existence of the church, but God has wonderfully intervened. In the early 19th century, Britain had lapsed into spiritual apathy, but God raised up George Whitefield, John and Charles Wesley and later John Newton, and the country was changed. Then followed the beginning of the great missionary movement with William Carey and others.

Following on from the promise of verse 19, verse 20 looks ahead to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to save sinners. *The Redeemer will come to Zion and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob.*’ The coming of the Holy Spirit upon the partakers of the new covenant is prophesied in verse 21. This verse is difficult to translate and this is seen in the way it is rendered in different versions of the Bible. However translated, the verse describes the invincible power of God working on behalf of his people. **Has Satan been attacking you so that you feel overwhelmed? Does the pressure seem unbearable? Take hold of the promise and trust in the Lord. He will never fail you.**

Arise, shine; for your light has come!

When the captivity in Babylon ended, the exiles were filled with joy and laughter (Psalm 126:1–3). The Lord called upon Zion, ‘*Arise, shine; for your light has come!*’ (1). The city with its temple was to be a light to the Gentiles (3). She is called upon to lift up her eyes and see the returning exiles (4). Zion would become radiant and her heart would *swell with joy* (4–5). Matthew Henry and Alec Motyer show that this chapter looks beyond the restoration of the exiles from their captivity and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. We have already seen that these prophecies with all their wonderful promises only find their ultimate fulfilment in the church which is *the Jerusalem above* (54:1; Galatians 4:25–27). Verses 19 to 21 look forward to the church made perfect and glorified after the second coming of Christ (cp. Revelation 21:2, 22–27).

As members of Christ’s church, we too must arise and shine:

- Because God has shone upon us (1; cp. 2 Corinthians 4:6).
- Because sinners are in darkness and in the grip of the evil one. Our light is a great witness to them (2–4; cp. 1 John 5:19).
- Because God is glorified when we shine (6; cp. Matthew 5:16). Darkness gives way to light, ignorance and sin are driven out, despair is replaced by hope, and enmity by peace.
- Because God promises the success of the gospel. Our light will attract sinners who will then praise God (3,6). Scoffers will be convinced and acknowledge that our testimony is true (14).

How can we shine for God? We shine by leading holy lives and keeping ourselves from sinning (21; cp. Ephesians 5:8–11; Philippians 2:14–15). We must have daily fellowship with God (1 John 1:3). Remember how radiant Moses was after coming from the presence of the Lord (Exodus 34:29–35). We shine through our good works (Matthew 5:16). **Are you shining for Christ in your home and at your place of work? A radiant Christian life is rare and much to be desired.** *‘Arise, shine; for your light has come!’*

He has clothed me with the garments of salvation

On a certain Sabbath day the Lord Jesus read the first two verses of Isaiah 61 to the congregation in the synagogue at Nazareth. He told them that this prophecy was being fulfilled among them (Luke 4:16–22). He came (1–2):

- To preach good news *to the poor*; this includes not only those who have no money, but those who are poor in spirit, who know that they cannot save themselves. They recognise their spiritual poverty and their need of God's help (cp. Matthew 5:3).
- *To heal the broken-hearted*, giving them comfort and peace.
- *To proclaim liberty to the captives*. He sets free those who are imprisoned by the evil one and who are gripped by guilt.
- *To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD*. He saves and accepts sinners. The gospel is the most wonderful news in the world!
- To proclaim *the day of vengeance of our God*. The Lord Jesus often spoke of the day of judgment (eg. Matthew 13:40–42; 25:31–46).

When the Lord Jesus saves us, he not only forgives us and frees us from the power of Satan and sin, but he also clothes us *with the garments of salvation* (10). What are these garments? – *The garment of praise* (3) and *the robe of righteousness* (10). He clothes us with his righteousness and with praise for all that he has done for us (10–11). **What do you know about being joyful in God? Does your life display his righteousness? Are you full of praise to him?** *The garments of salvation* – righteousness and praise to our most wonderful God and Saviour. Are your garments of salvation seen by those around you?

*Jesus, thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.*

*This spotless robe the same appears,
When ruined nature sinks in years!
No age can change its glorious hue;
The robe of Christ is ever new.*

(N. L. Von Zinzendorf)

You shall be called by a new name

The exiles were encouraged to return to Jerusalem (10–11) which would be restored and rebuilt after the captivity in Babylon. The prophecies concerning Jerusalem were only partially fulfilled after the exile. We must not look for a latter-day glory for Israel and Jerusalem, however. These prophecies find their completion in the church. The promises are for the church which is like a beautiful crown, a royal diadem in the hand of God (3). Her glory will be displayed when she is perfected at the second coming of the Lord Jesus (Romans 8:18–19).

All who love the Lord long for the blessing of Christ's church and pray that she will shine brightly in her righteousness (1; cp. 60:1). God promises here, *'You shall be called by a new name'* (2). What is this new name given by God to his people? *'But you shall be called Hephzibah and your land Beulah'* (4; these words mean 'my delight is in her' and 'married'). The church is pictured as the bride of Christ in the New Testament (Ephesians 5:27; Revelation 21:2).

Christian, you are precious to Christ. How wonderful! This should encourage you when trials would seem to overwhelm you. Satan may hate you, but the Lord loves you and delights in you. The church is also called by other names – *'The Holy People, the Redeemed of the LORD; ... Sought out, a City Not Forsaken'* (12). God the Father gave the One most precious to him to die for us at Calvary. He has redeemed us with the precious blood of Christ, he sought us and he wants us for himself, a holy people. **He wants our wholehearted love and devotion because he delights in us.**

*The church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is his new creation
By water and the word;
From heaven he came and sought her
To be his holy bride,
With his own blood he bought her,
And for her life he died.* (Samuel J. Stone)

You who make mention of the LORD, do not keep silent

We have repeated the reading of Isaiah 62 today, but will focus our attention on verses 6 and 7. The Lord reminds Jerusalem (and the church) that he has set watchmen on her walls. Many Bible commentators believe that the watchmen refers to God's prophets. Matthew Henry comments, 'Ministers are watchmen on the church's walls, for it is as a city besieged ... It is necessary that, as watchmen, they be wakeful and faithful, and willing to endure hardness.'

There is also a call for all believers to engage in urgent prayer. *You who make mention of the LORD, do not keep silent, and give him no rest.*

- We must give ourselves no rest while the church languishes in weakness and in confusion. There is an urgent need for intercessors, who will spend much time in prayer. Most of us have busy lifestyles, but haven't we got our priorities wrong if we neglect the privilege of coming to our heavenly Father in prayer?
- We must also give God no rest, but wrestle and persevere in prayer for the advancement of his kingdom.

The Lord Jesus urges us not to lose heart in prayer (Luke 18:1). How important is prayer in your life? Do you pray much in private? Are you keen to be at the prayer meeting? Give yourself no rest, give God no rest. Pray, pray, pray! **If you are taking things easy and not pulling your weight in your church, will you please take God's Word to heart and obey what the Lord has to say to you?**

*What various hindrances we meet
In coming to the mercy-seat!
Yet who, that knows the worth of prayer,
But wishes to be often there.*

*Restraining prayer, we cease to fight;
Prayer makes the Christian's armour bright:
And Satan trembles when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees.* (William Cowper)

Who is this who comes from Edom?

The Lord had promised the people of Zion, ‘*Surely your salvation is coming*’ (62:11), but they are puzzled at the sight of a mighty and majestic warrior returning in victory from Edom. This nation was a long-standing enemy of Israel and Bozrah was one of her chief cities. Two questions are asked:

1. ‘*Who is this who comes from Edom?*’ (1). The warrior answers, ‘*I who speak in righteousness, mighty to save.*’ The prophet is seeing the Servant of Jehovah (the Lord Jesus) returning victorious from the fight with his enemies (symbolised by Edom). When he died on the cross, he disarmed principalities and powers (Colossians 2:15). He defeated Satan and the armies of hell. He is *mighty to save!* No enemy is able to thwart our wonderful Saviour in his work of saving sinners from the power of Satan and sin.

2. ‘*Why is your apparel red, and your garments like one who treads the winepress?*’ (2). The stains had not come from grape-juice by treading a winepress, but were of the blood of his enemies. He trod the winepress alone to defeat his enemies. The apostle John had a similar vision of the conquering Saviour (Revelation 19:11–16). The ‘*day of vengeance of our God*’ is again spoken of in verse 4 (cp 61:2).

The Lord Jesus will come again as the conquering King and Judge but we must never forget the tremendous price that he paid to save sinners (1 Peter 1:18–19). **When Jesus died to save us, he was stripped of his garments and his body was covered with his own blood.** What a price to pay to save poor sinners like us! What amazing love! Let us praise him.

*Look, ye saints, the sight is glorious,
See the Man of sorrows now!
From the fight returned victorious,
Every knee to him shall bow,
Crown him, crown him,
Crowns become the Victor’s brow.*

(Thomas Kelly)

I will mention the lovingkindnesses of the LORD

The prophet now turns to the Lord in thanksgiving and prayer (63:7 to 64:12). He begins by affirming, *'I will mention the lovingkindnesses (steadfast love) of the LORD and the praises of the LORD.'* God had shown great goodness toward Israel *according to his mercies, according to the multitude of his lovingkindnesses.* (7).

Isaiah recalls the goodness of the Lord to the Israelites. God had shared with them in their affliction; *in his love and in his pity he redeemed them. He delivered them, he bore them and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit* (9–10). What ingratitude! The prophet reminds us of the days of old when the Lord led Moses and their ancestors out of Egypt and parted the Red Sea for them to cross over in safety (11–13). This miracle showed the mighty power of God, his everlasting name referring to his character (13–14).

Christian, think about the goodness of God to you. He gave his Son to die on the cross to save you from your sin. He has pitied you, had mercy on you and he has freely forgiven you. He has given you eternal life and an inheritance in heaven. **Are you making mention of the goodness of the Lord?** Do you praise him and obey his Word or have you grown cold in heart?

God has been good to us and he has never failed us. Let us not become like those who have never known Christ or his rule in their lives (19)? Let us keep ourselves from complaining and give thanks to God for his goodness and mercies (Psalm 89:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:18). You will then rejoice *in the lovingkindnesses of the LORD.*

*Awake, my soul, in joyful lays, **
And sing thy great Redeemer's praise;
He justly claims a song from thee —
His lovingkindness, O how free! (Samuel Medley)

* A 'lay' is a song.

Oh, that you would rend the heavens!

Isaiah lived in desperate times and he called upon God to:

- *Look down from heaven* to see the desolate state of his sanctuary and of his people (63:15–19). See how the prophet addressed God. He was aware that he had come into the presence of the almighty, awesome God whose habitation is *'holy and glorious'* (15). He prayed to God as the *'Father'* of his people and as their *'Redeemer'* (16). He then asked God why his judgment on his people had led to further hardening of their hearts and to further sinning (17).
- *Come down. 'Oh, that you would rend the heavens! That you would come down!'* (64:1). He cried to the Lord to come down in mighty power that the nations would tremble at his presence (2).

Isaiah then confessed the sin of the people and acknowledged that God was angry because of their sin. Isaiah said, *'We need to be saved'* and confessed, *'All our righteousnesses are like filthy rags'* (5–6). Sin pollutes us and this causes God to hide his face from us (6–7). Isaiah recognised that we are like clay, worked in the hands of God who is our potter, as he called upon the Lord to consider the desolation of Jerusalem and the temple (8–12).

God does act for those who prayerfully wait for him and who lead righteous lives (4–5). If you are disheartened or discouraged, let this wonderful truth grip you. We do not pray in vain. Isaiah complained that there was no one who stirred himself up to take hold of God (7). He could have been describing the situation in the 21st century. **Prayer is still the most wonderful privilege which is most neglected. How we need to pray for revival in these wicked times! How we need to pray with fervour and expectation, 'Oh, that you would rend the heavens! That you would come down!'**

*Lord, we are few, but thou art near,
Nor short thine arm, nor deaf thine ear;
O rend the heavens, come quickly down,
And make a thousand hearts thine own!*

(William Cowper)

I have stretched out my hands all day long to a rebellious people

The Lord responded to the prayer of the prophet by pointing out that he had been sought and found by people from heathen nations, but Israel had continued in rebellion (1–2; quoted in Romans 10:20–21). God said, *I have stretched out my hands all day long to a rebellious people*. Alec Motyer comments, ‘The major use of the phrase “to spread out the hands” is to adopt an attitude of prayer 91:15; 1 Ki. 8:22,38; Ps. 143:6) ... What a reversal, then, of the rightful relationship! The Lord with his hands spread out! Such is his longing to move his people to a desired response’ (COMMENTARY ON THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH, page 524). This reminds me of the lament of the Lord Jesus over Jerusalem: ‘*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her, ! How often I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!*’ (Matthew 23:37). The grace of God is wonderful; he is worthy of our love and devotion!

God’s people had provoked God to anger by offering sacrifices in gardens (worship under trees, a practice derived from Canaanite religion, 3; cp. 66:17)). They also indulged in occult practices among the tombs and ate unclean meat and were repulsive to God (5). The Lord warned that he would surely punish the wicked Jews for their sins (6–7). They had forsaken the Lord and had prepared a table with food and drink offerings for the pagan deities, *Gad* (meaning ‘Fortune’) and *Meni* (meaning ‘Number’ or ‘Destiny’). God would therefore number them for the sword. Those hardened by are in a dreadful state, and are unwilling to answer when God speaks to them (11–12).

God did have his elect remnant who sought him and they were marked out for blessing (9–10). The Valley of Achor was a valley of trouble which held bitter memories for the Jews (Joshua 7:26) but now it would be a valley of rest and peace (10). Their happy future of God’s elect is contrasted with the fearful future of the wicked (13–16). The Lord is *the God of truth* (16) and we can safely trust in him; there is a bright tomorrow for believers!

Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth

God says, ‘Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth’ (17). This is more than a promise of the restoration of the exiles from Babylon and of the rebuilding of Jerusalem. There is a description of an idyllic life on earth (18–25), but how else can heaven be described for us to understand? **Heaven is wonderful beyond our wildest imagination!** Alec Motyer writes, ‘Throughout this passage Isaiah uses aspects of present life to create impressions of the life that is yet to come. It will be a life totally provided for (13), totally happy (19c,d), totally secure (22–23) and totally at peace (24–25). Things we have no real capacity to understand can be expressed only through things we know and experience’ (COMMENTARY ON THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH, page 530).

We see then, that the word pictures in these verses point to the happiness of the New Jerusalem which is above (Galatians 4:26; Hebrews 12:22). There will be no more death and the picture of a child dying when one hundred years old and a sinner considered cursed if dying at one hundred years old is a picture to describe the endless life in glory. It is impossible to take in all the happiness that awaits us in heaven, but we know that we will see the Lord Jesus who gave himself for us on the cross (Revelation 22:4) and there will be a great reunion with all who have died in Christ. Endless joy and peace! Hallelujah! The themes in these verses are taken up in the New Testament (2 Peter 3:10–13; Revelation 21:1–5, 27). There will be no more death, no more sorrow or crying and we shall be safe for ever. and sinners are shut out. **Do you have this wonderful Christian hope?**

*We expect a bright tomorrow;
All will be well;
Faith can sing through days of sorrow,
All, all is well;
On our Father’s love relying,
Jesus every need supplying,
Then in living or in dying
All must be well.*

(Mary Peters)

You who tremble at his word

This final chapter of Isaiah’s prophecy contains a message of hope and consolation for those who are true to the Lord and warnings of judgment for the wicked. We are reminded of the vastness and the greatness of Jehovah. No temple can contain the omnipresent, sovereign Creator of the universe. *‘Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool. Where is the house that you will build for me?’* (1; cp. 1 Kings 8:27).

God looks on and blesses those who are poor in spirit and who tremble at his word (2; cp. 57:15; Matthew 5:3) but he has stern words for those who have the outward trappings of religion but ignore him when he calls them to walk in his ways (3; cp. 65:2, 12). He will bring their worst fears upon them (4).

There is another promise that Jerusalem will be rebuilt and that God will comfort his people and care for them as a mother cares for her young child (5–12). The prophet brings words of comfort from God: *‘Hear the word of the LORD, you who tremble at his word’* (5). He had earlier said, *‘But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, who trembles at my word’* (2). God cares for those who are humble and obey his Word (cp. 57:15)!

These verses challenge us concerning our attitude to the Word of God.

We should tremble at the Word of God because it is the word of the glorious Creator. When he speaks, we must listen with attentive and obedient hearts. What does it mean to tremble at the Word of God?

- It is to recognise the Bible as the inspired and infallible Word of God, free from any error (2 Timothy 3:16).
- It is to reverence God’s Word because it is pure and it is true (Psalm 119:140; John 17:17). *My heart stands in awe of your word* (Psalm 119:161).
- It is to love and obey the Bible (Psalm 119:105, 140; John 14:15).

Do you tremble at the Word of God, expecting the Lord to speak to you as you read it and hear it preached?

The hand of the LORD shall be known to his servants

These verses continue to contrast the blessing of God's people with the cursing of God's enemies. *The hand of the LORD shall be known to his servants, and his indignation toward his enemies* (14). The picture of God coming with fire and with chariots to judge all flesh (15–16) will be fulfilled when the Lord Jesus comes in splendour and glory to judge the world. The blessings of the returned exiles to Israel foreshadow the end of time when God will create new heavens and a new earth (18–23). Isaiah closes his prophecy with a warning to sinners. The Lord Jesus quoted from verse 24 on one occasion when he warned his hearers about judgment and hell (Mark 9:42–44).

What does Scripture mean by '*the hand of the LORD*' (14)? The hand of God is his powerful working for his own glory and on behalf of his people. The hand of God is:

- A punishing hand visiting judgment on the apostates who do not tremble at God's Word but worship idols (2–3, 15–17).
- A purposeful hand, sovereignly bringing all his plans to fruition (18–19; cp. 14:26–27). Ezra was much encouraged as he saw God's hand upon him, working out his sovereign purposes (Ezra 7:27–28; cp. Nehemiah 2:8, 18). *The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, like the rivers of water; he turns it wherever he wishes* (Proverbs 21:1).
- A protecting hand (49:2; Ezra 8:31; John 10:28–29).
- A providing hand meeting all our needs (11; Psalm 104:27–28; 145:16).

The prophecy of Isaiah closes with a contrast between the joy of the redeemed in the new Jerusalem and the misery of the ungodly in hell; (22–24; cp. Mark 9:43–48.)

What wonderful blessings are the portion of those to whom God makes known his mighty hand! These blessings come with a condition, however. We have no right to claim them if we are not serving God. God makes known his hand to his servants (14). **Are you serving the Lord? Is he first in your life?**

LUKE

The Gospel of Luke is the longest of the four Gospels, containing 1151 verses (Matthew, which has more chapters, contains 1071 verses). Luke the beloved physician (Colossians 4:14) was a faithful companion of the apostle Paul, joining him on his second missionary journey (cp. ‘we’, Acts 16:10 – ‘they’ in previous verses). He remained with Paul until the end of his life (2 Timothy 4:11).

Luke was a careful historian giving the precise time for the setting of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus (1:5; 2:1–2). He wrote his Gospel to give Theophilus (whose name means ‘loved by God’) a history of the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Theophilus was probably a high-ranking Roman official for he is addressed as ‘*most excellent*’ (1:3), a title given to Roman governors (eg. Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25). He may have been a new convert whom Luke wanted to encourage and build up in the faith (cp. 1:4).

Luke’s good news is that Christ the Lord is the Saviour of sinners (2:11) and that he is full of compassion for the poor and the needy (eg. 4:18–19; 7:13,39,43–50). *The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost* (19:10).

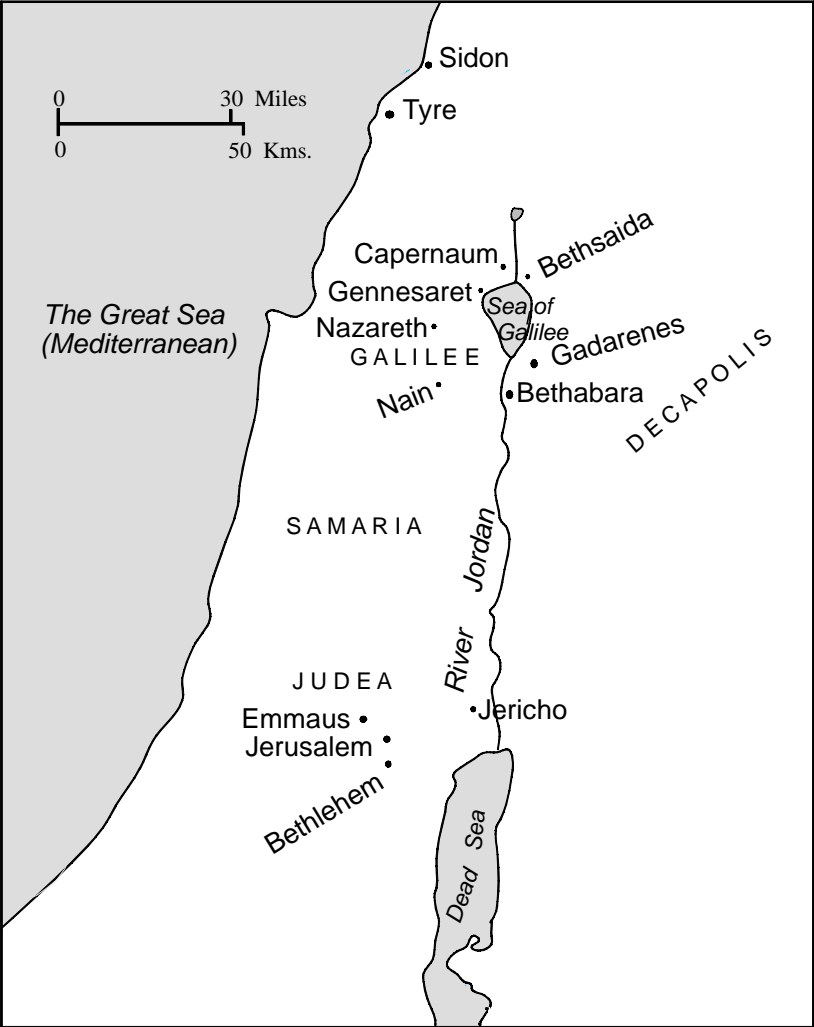
Outline of Luke

- | | | | |
|----|---|---|----------------|
| 1. | Introduction | – | 1:1–4 |
| 2. | The Coming of the Saviour | – | 1:5 to 2:52. |
| 3. | The Preparation of the Saviour for his Ministry | | 3:1 to 4:13. |
| 4. | The Ministry of the Saviour in Galilee | – | 4:14 to 9:50 |
| 5. | The Journey of the Saviour to Jerusalem | – | 9:51 to 19:28 |
| 6. | The Ministry of the Saviour in Jerusalem | – | 19:29 to 21:38 |
| 7. | The Sufferings and Death of the Saviour | – | 22:1 to 23:56 |
| 8. | The Resurrection of the Saviour | – | 24:1–53 |

For further reading I recommend:

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON LUKE by J.C. Ryle (2 volumes) and William Hendriksen’s COMMENTARY ON LUKE, both published by Banner of Truth.

Map covering places mentioned in the Gospel of Luke



The certainty of those things in which you were instructed

The Christian faith is based on facts not on myths nor on the ideas of men. The events described in Luke's Gospel and the rest of Scripture really happened. Luke writes of *those things which are most surely believed among us* (1). 'Most surely believed' carries with it the idea of fulfilment or accomplishment (see ESV – 'have been accomplished'). The coming of Christ into the world, his death and resurrection to save sinners fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. Luke knew the apostles who were *eye-witnesses* of the things recorded in his Gospel. They are also described as *ministers* ('servants') *of the word* (2). God's servants are also servants of his Word.

Luke records things which are not found in the other Gospels. He gives us details of the circumstances surrounding the birth of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus. He alone writes of the conversion of Zachaeus and of the dying thief and the appearance of the risen Christ to Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus. The parables of the Prodigal Son and the Pharisee and Tax Collector are also unique to Luke.

Others (eg. Matthew and Mark) had produced accounts of Christ's life and ministry and Luke also felt constrained to write *an orderly account* of these things (1,3). The words '*having had perfect understanding*' (3) are translated from the Greek verb which means 'to follow closely'. Luke was not one of the twelve apostles, but he had investigated or *followed all things closely* (ESV) from the very first. He wanted Theophilus to *know the certainty of those things in which* he was instructed (4). Instruction in the faith, reading the word, obeying it and applying its teaching to our lives is most important. If we truly love the Lord, we will make every effort to know his word better and to obey him. How well do you know *those things which are most surely believed among us*? **We believe in certainties and how wonderful they are.**

NB. The abbreviation 'ESV' refers to the English Standard Version of the Holy Bible.

Your prayer is heard

The days of Herod (5) were evil and troubled times for Judea. The king was a tyrant and the land was under Roman occupation. Zacharias the priest and his wife Elizabeth were a godly couple. They are described as being *righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless* (6). God's people are not preserved from trouble and trials. Zacharias and his wife were childless and Elizabeth was now past the age of child-bearing; this would have brought them much heartache, just as it does to those in a similar situation today. To make matters worse, childlessness was looked on as a punishment from God for some sin; hence Elizabeth speaks of '*my reproach*' (25).

The lot fell upon Zacharias to burn incense in the temple (9). This was a once in a lifetime honour for a priest but for Zacharias it was to become an especially memorable occasion. He was terrified when the angel Gabriel appeared to him as he was burning incense. The angel said to him, '*Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard*' (13). He told him that Elizabeth would conceive and bear him a son who was to be called John. The child would bring them joy and gladness at his birth and he would be *great in the sight of the Lord and filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb*. God would use him to turn many to the Lord and *to make ready a people prepared for the Lord* (13–17).

The name Zacharias means 'Jehovah has remembered' and Elizabeth means 'My God is an oath' (that is, 'the absolutely reliable One'). By this time they would have given up praying for a child, but the prayers of earlier years had not been in vain. God had remembered them and heard their prayer. **Never be discouraged when there appears to be no answer to your prayers. God hears and answers, and his timing is perfect.**

Because you did not believe my words

Zacharias was a godly man but even the appearance of the angel Gabriel did not convince him that Elizabeth could conceive in her old age. The angel said to Zacharias, *‘I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God’* who had sent him to bring good news (18–19). Zacharias knew the Scriptures and would have accepted that God had miraculously intervened to enable childless Sarah to conceive when she was well past the age of childbearing (Genesis 18:11–14; 21:1–2). How easy it is to affirm our belief in God’s Word with all its promises and yet be unbelieving when our own faith is tested.

Zacharias was guilty of the sin of unbelief. Gabriel told him, *‘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’* (20). The Lord chastises us when we sin because he loves us (Hebrews 12:5–11). The people waiting outside recognised that the speechless priest had seen a vision. Elizabeth conceived as Gabriel had promised and she rejoiced in the goodness of God (24–25).

We must guard our hearts against unbelief for without faith we cannot please God (Hebrews 11:6). J.C. Ryle comments, ‘Let us watch and pray daily against this soul-ruining sin. Concessions to it rob believers of their inward peace, weaken their hands in the day of battle, bring clouds over their hope, make their chariot wheels drive heavily. According to the degree of our faith will be our enjoyment of Christ’s salvation, our patience in the day of trial, our victory over the world. Unbelief, in short, is the true cause of a thousand spiritual diseases, and once allowed to nestle in our hearts, will eat as doth a canker ... Let it be a settled maxim in our religion, to trust every word of God implicitly, and to beware of unbelief’ (EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON LUKE, vol. 1, page 20).

For with God nothing will be impossible

During the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary. She was puzzled and troubled by his greeting which told her that she was *highly favoured*, that the Lord was with her and that she was blessed among women (26–29). Many people give Mary much more honour than they give to her almighty Son. They worship her and pray to her. They are very mistaken and there isn't any evidence that Mary was venerated in the early church, nor does the Bible teach that we should seek her help. A woman once said to Jesus, *'Blessed is the womb that bore you'*, but he said, *'More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!'* (11:27–28). God will bless every Christian who obeys him.

He then revealed that she would conceive and bear a Son whom she should call Jesus. Mary could not understand how this could be, since she was a virgin, but Gabriel told her that she would conceive by the Holy Spirit and that the child would be called *the Son of God* (30–35). Gabriel encouraged Mary with the news that her relative, Elizabeth, had conceived a son in her old age, He told her, *'For with God nothing will be impossible'* (36–37).

Mary's humble submission to God's will is lovely to consider (38). Remember, that betrothal was not marriage but it was more binding than engagement in the western world. Mary would have to face the shame of apparently conceiving out of wedlock (cp. Matthew 1:18–20). This passage clearly teaches that the Lord Jesus was born of a virgin. Those who refuse to believe this generally reject all other accounts of the supernatural in the Bible. God is infinitely great and powerful – why should we consider anything too hard for him?

Are you prepared to submit to God's will even though you may be perplexed by your present circumstances? Is your faith being tried? Is Satan assailing you with one doubt after another? **Remember when you pray that God is able to do anything, for with God nothing will be impossible.**

For he who is mighty has done great things for me

Mary visited Elizabeth who lived in the hill country of Judea and stayed for three months (39,56). The elderly woman was filled with the Holy Spirit and repeated the words of the angel Gabriel, *'Blessed are you among women'* (42; cp. verse 28). She recognised Mary's unborn child as her Lord and said, *'Blessed is she who believed'* (41–45). How different the faith of Mary compared to the unbelief of Zacharias. Faith pleases God. J.C. Ryle observes, 'Better a thousand times be rich in faith than rich in gold' (EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON LUKE, vol.1, page 33). Read about the exploits of the great men and women of faith in Hebrews chapter 11. They walked by faith, embraced God's promises by faith, endured great suffering by faith and died in faith. Mary belonged to that illustrious company. Do you really trust in God?

Mary burst into a torrent of praise to God. Her words are known as 'The Magnificat', and they remind us of the song of Hannah (46–55; cp. 1 Samuel 2:1–10). *'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour'* (46–47). The Mary of Scripture is very different from the Mary venerated by some as the Queen of Heaven, immaculately conceived and sinless. She would be the first to disown such erroneous and idolatrous veneration. The humble maiden spoke of her lowly state and acknowledged her need of a Saviour (47–48). She recalled God's acts of power and mercy in the past and ended by remembering God's promise to Abraham, *'In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'* (51–55; cp. Genesis 12:3). She evidently saw the coming birth of her Son as the fulfilment of this promise.

Mary testified, *'For he who is mighty has done great things for me'* (49). **Every Christian can echo these words!** The Lord Jesus loves us and died to purchase our salvation. He has saved us from our sins and reconciled us to God the Father and has made us his own. He has given us a new heart and eternal life. Doesn't this make you want to sing the praises of God? Dare we remain silent when he has done so much for us?

He has visited and redeemed his people

The birth of John brought great joy to Zacharias and Elizabeth and to their neighbours and relatives just as Gabriel had said (58; cp. verse 14). The baby was circumcised the eighth day after his birth according to God's law (Leviticus 12:1–3) and to everyone's surprise Elizabeth named him John, which was not a family name. When Zacharias wrote to confirm this name (which was chosen by God, verse 13), he was immediately healed of his dumbness and opened his mouth to praise God. Those present recognised that John was no ordinary child. *The hand of the Lord was with him* (57–66).

The prophecy of Zacharias is known as 'The Benedictus'. He praised God saying, '*For he has visited and redeemed his people*' (68). He recalled that the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ had been foretold by the mouth of God's holy prophets (69–75).

Zacharias moves on from his hymn of praise to address his infant son. John would be called '*the prophet of the Highest*' who would prepare the ways of the Lord (76). The main subject of Zacharias' prophecy was not John but Jesus who would be '*a horn of salvation*' to save his people from their enemies (69,71 – a '*horn*' is a symbol of strength). Zacharias described Jesus as '*the Highest ... the Lord ... the Dayspring from on high*' ('*sunrise*' ESV). – *The Dayspring from on high has visited us; to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace* (78–79).

God has visited and redeemed his people to save us from our great enemies of Satan, sin and death. *He has delivered us from the power of darkness* and brought us into the kingdom of his beloved Son (Colossians 1:13). Jesus came into the world to bring his great salvation and the forgiveness of sins; he guides our feet into the way of peace (77,79). **What should be our response to such great mercy and grace that God has freely bestowed upon us?** Let us *serve him without fear* (of our enemies), *in holiness and righteousness* (74–75).

A decree went out from Caesar Augustus

Joseph took Mary to be his wife after the angel spoke to him in a dream (Matthew 1:24). *And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered* (1). Everyone was obliged to register for this census in his own city and Joseph, a descendant of David, had to go to Bethlehem (3–4). The timing of this decree could hardly have been worse for Joseph and Mary. Travel in those times would have been very arduous for a pregnant woman and to make matters worse, Bethlehem was overcrowded with visitors. The Lord Jesus was born in an outbuilding of an inn where animals were sheltered (5–7).

We must look beyond the decree of Caesar Augustus to the eternal decree of God. His purposes can never be thwarted (Isaiah 14:27; 46:10; Ephesians 1:11; Hebrews 6:17) and he had purposed that Christ should be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Caesar decreed because God had already decreed (cp. Proverbs 21:1)! He was unaware of the fact that he was being driven and directed by God.

When we face inconvenience, problems or hardship through the actions of ungodly people, let us encourage ourselves with the truth that God is working all things together for good (Romans 8:28). **Nothing happens by chance in the life of the child of God.**

Sovereign Ruler of the skies,
Ever gracious, ever wise;
All my times are in thy hand,
All events at thy command.

He that formed me in the womb,
He shall guide me to the tomb;
All my times shall ever be
Ordered by his wise decree.

(John Ryland)

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God

The shepherds were terrified when they saw the angel standing before them to announce the birth of Christ. He reassured them and told them that he was bringing them ‘*good tidings of great joy which will be to all people*’. The good news is the birth of a Saviour, the promised Christ (or ‘Messiah’). His title ‘Lord’ indicates that Jesus is no less than God. God was manifested in the flesh (1 Timothy 3:16).

When God created the world, there was joy among the angels as they sang together (Job 38:7 – where they are described as ‘*the morning stars*’ and ‘*the sons of God*’). After the announcement of the birth of Jesus, a multitude of angels praised God with the words, ‘*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!*’ (14; cp. ESV – ‘*peace among those with whom he is pleased*’). One of the great blessings of salvation is that the Lord Jesus gives surpassing peace to those who love him, trust in him and obey him (cp. John 14:27; Philippians 4:6–7). We have peace with God because of justification and forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ (Romans 5:1,8–9), and the peace of God ruling in our hearts (Colossians 3:15). **Do you know this peace in your life?**

The shepherds realised their great privilege in receiving the announcement of the Saviour’s birth and hurried to Bethlehem to see the new-born King. Their account of the angelic visitation would have greatly encouraged Joseph and Mary. *Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen* (20). J.C. Ryle comments, ‘Their simple faith received a rich reward. They had the mighty privilege of being the first of all mankind, after Mary and Joseph, who saw with believing eyes the new-born Messiah. They soon returned, ‘*glorifying and praising God*’ for what they had seen. May our spirit be like theirs! May we ever believe implicitly, act promptly, and wait for nothing, when the path of duty is clear! So doing, we shall have a reward like that of the shepherds. The journey that is begun in faith will generally end in praise’ (EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON LUKE, vol. 1, page 59).

Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace

The Lord Jesus was born under the law and was circumcised the eighth day from his birth (21; cp. Galatians 4:4). According to the law of Moses a woman was unclean for forty days from the birth of her son. Her purification was completed with the sacrifice of a lamb as a burnt offering and a young pigeon or turtle dove as a sin offering. Those who were poor were able to substitute another of these birds in place of the lamb (Leviticus 12). Verse 24 indicates that Joseph and Mary were poor and had not yet received the gifts from the wise men (Matthew 2:11).

Though true religion was at a low ebb in the land, there were godly souls *who looked for redemption in Jerusalem* (38). Among these were an elderly man, Simeon, and the aged prophetess, Anna. God had told Simeon that he would see the Messiah before he died. The Holy Spirit led him to be in the temple for the arrival of Joseph and Mary. When he saw them with Jesus, he took up the child in his arms and praised God. He said, *'Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word'* (29–30). Simeon was prepared to die knowing that heaven was awaiting him. Would you be able to say the same thing if you were expecting to die soon?

Joseph and Mary marvelled at the prophetic words of Simeon who said that the Lord Jesus would bring salvation to Gentiles as well as Jews. He said that Jesus was *'destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel'* (some would reject him and be lost for ever, others would trust in him and be saved). A price had to be paid for this salvation. A sword would pierce Mary's soul (30–35); this means that she would know the terrible anguish and pain of seeing her son rejected, humiliated, tortured and crucified for sinners. After this, Anna came into the temple and broke out into thanksgiving to God as she recognised Jesus as the promised Messiah. Here was an elderly woman who gave herself to continual, earnest prayer with fasting and she began to tell others about Jesus (36–38). **We are never too old to pray or to speak about our precious Saviour!**

He ... was subject to them

Here is the only account in Scripture of the early years of Jesus following his infancy. Jesus is truly man as well as truly God. His humanity is shown in the statements, *And the child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; ... And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men* (40,52). You may wonder how Jesus *in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* (Colossians 2:3) could increase in wisdom. These verses speak of human development; the Lord Jesus increased in growth and in wisdom with respect to his human nature, not his divine nature. J.C. Ryle comments, ‘How the same Person could be at once perfect God and perfect man, is a point that necessarily passes our understanding ... One thing, however, is perfectly clear, and we shall do well to lay firm hold upon it. Our Lord partook of everything that belongs to man’s nature, sin only excepted.’ (J.C. RYLE, vol. 1, pages 75–76).

Joseph and Mary attended the Passover in Jerusalem every year (41). On their return journey to Nazareth they inadvertently left Jesus behind supposing him to have been with relatives or friends. They had travelled for a day before discovering that he was missing. The anxious couple were obliged to return to Jerusalem where they were amazed to find him in discussion with the great Jewish teachers of that time. These men were astonished at his understanding of profound religious questions (43–48). Mary asked why he had caused them such anxiety, though they were wrong to have left without checking that he was with their company. He answered them, ‘*Why is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?*’ (49). They were baffled by these words but Mary *kept all these things in her heart* (50–51; cp. verse 19).

Though Jesus is God, he humbled himself *and was subject to them* (51). **When you find submission to another person difficult (Ephesians 5:21), remember that in order to save you from your sin, Jesus accepted the authority of his parents and he obeyed the will of the Father, going to Calvary to die (Philippians 2:5–9).**