

They knew that he was the Christ

These verses give an account of a memorable Sabbath in Capernaum. A man was delivered from demon-possession as he heard the Lord Jesus teaching in the synagogue (35) and later Peter’s mother-in-law was healed (38-39). At sunset (when the sabbath ended), many sick people were brought to Jesus and he healed them and cast out many demons (40-41). Those who heard Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum were astonished at the authority of his teaching and at his power over demons (32, 36). The subject of demon-possession attracts controversy but the Bible distinguishes between this and physical illness (40-41). Some modernists such as the late William Barclay deny the reality of demon-possession, ascribing it to primitive superstition (eg. DAILY STUDY BIBLE, GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, volume 1, pages 327-329). On the other hand, there are extreme charismatics who teach that most of the problems in the lives of Christians are caused by demons and they spend much time casting these imaginary demons out of their followers. We must beware of both extremes.

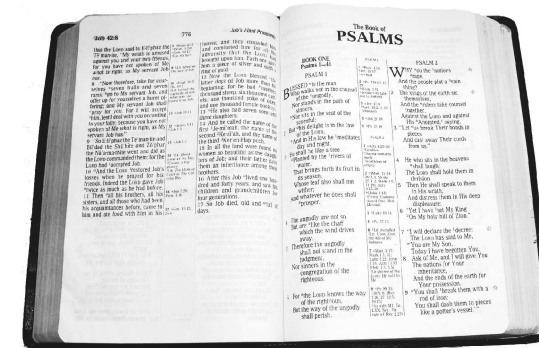
The demon in the man was terrified of Jesus and recognised him as ‘*the Holy One of God*’ (34). Other demons also acknowledged him as the Son of God *for they knew that he was the Christ* (41). They knew the Messiah when they met him but most of the religious people who heard him did not believe. Satan and his evil spirits are powerful, but the Lord Jesus is even more powerful. The astonished people said, ‘*He commands the unclean spirits, and they come out*’ (36). **Our great Saviour who dwells within us is far greater than Satan’s army. To him be all the glory!**

*Jesus! the name high over all,
In hell, or earth, or sky;
Angels and men before it fall,
And devils fear and fly.* (Charles Wesley)

(I can recommend an excellent book on biblical demonology, ‘SATAN CAST OUT’ by Frederick S. Leahy which is published by Banner of Truth).

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God’s holy Word simply explained and applied



September 2013

Bible readings from Isaiah chapters 58 to 66
Luke chapters 1 to 4

When they heard these things, (they) were filled with wrath

Jesus returned in the power of the Holy Spirit to Galilee where his ministry in the synagogues was acclaimed far and wide (14–15) but he was to encounter strong opposition in his own town of Nazareth. He stood up in the synagogue to read the Scriptures and was handed the scroll containing the prophecy of Isaiah. Turning to chapter 61, verses 1 and 2, he told an expectant congregation that this scripture was being fulfilled before them that very day (16–21). The Lord Jesus was making it quite plain that he was indeed the Messiah promised in those verses. Though the people marvelled at his gracious words, they regarded him only as Joseph's son. They had heard of his miracles at Capernaum and now wanted to see signs before they would be convinced. Jesus answered the proverb that was in their thoughts with another proverb: 'No prophet is accepted in his own country' (22–24).

The Lord Jesus reminded his hearers that though there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, God sent the prophet to a Gentile widow in Sidon. Moreover, the Syrian army commander Naaman was cleansed from his leprosy during Elisha's time but none of the many lepers in Israel were healed. *Then all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath* (28). The very people who had earlier marvelled at the gracious words of Jesus were now filled with indignation and hatred. They attempted to throw Jesus down from a cliff, but he was miraculously preserved (29–30). This was an answer to Satan's earlier temptation (4:9–11).

The truth of God's sovereignty in his dealings with men upset those who heard Jesus. Why should God by-pass people in Israel and yet have mercy on Gentiles? God's absolute sovereignty in election is plainly taught in Scripture (eg. Romans 9:11–23). **The glorious doctrine of God's free and sovereign grace is scorned by the world and hated by many religious people. Let us proclaim it, rejoice in it, be humbled by it, and praise God for it. Hallelujah!**

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The notes for 1 September are included with the notes for August

The devil ... departed from him until an opportune time

Following his baptism the Lord Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for forty days (1–2). He fasted throughout this time and was much weakened in body through lack of food. Imagine just how great the temptations must have been as he suffered the sustained onslaughts of the devil.

- Satan first tempted Christ to doubt. He said, *‘If you are the Son of God’* (3,9). God the Father had said at his baptism, *‘You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased’* (3:22). The devil often assails us with doubts – remember how he questioned the word of God in Eden, *‘Has God indeed said ... ?’* (Genesis 3:1).
- Satan then promised Christ the kingdoms of the world, *‘Therefore, if you will worship before me, all will be yours’* (5–7). Jesus knew that the way to glory was through suffering and death (Philippians 2:5–11). Satan’s promises are false. He promised Eve that if she took the forbidden fruit she would be like God (Genesis 3:5). She soon found this to be a lie. Some false cults believe that we can become as God.
- The devil’s next tactic was to try to make Christ sinfully presume upon God the Father’s care by assuming that he would be rescued by angels if he threw himself from the top of the temple (9–12). Adam and Eve presumed that they would be able to eat the fruit and not die (Genesis 3:1–4). We must never tempt God by sinful presumption.

Satan misused Scripture when he tempted the Lord Jesus who responded by using the word of God (10–12). False cults often twist the meaning of the Bible to support their heresies (cp. 2 Peter 3:16). How did Jesus respond to the devil? He used the word of God, quoting from Deuteronomy on each occasion. **You will be stronger in the face of temptation if you know your Bible. You do not have to give in to temptation. You do not have to sin (Romans 6:14).** Satan never gives up, however. – *Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time* (13). Satan is patient. He waits for his right moment to get us off our guard. Let us always be vigilant (1 Peter 5:8).

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 religion 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. Their nation was guilty of much sin, including murder (3,7; cp. Romans 3:15–16), evil deeds (3), lies (4), eagerness to think and to do evil (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 (14–15). The Lord is not an indifferent observer of a nation's wickedness; he is displeased (15).

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). 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.** *When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the LORD will lift up a standard against him* (19).

You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased

John baptized people who had repented of their sin (3,8) so why did the Lord Jesus submit to baptism when he is sinless and has no need to repent (Hebrews 4:15; 1 John 3:5)? Baptism is a symbol of identification (believer's baptism sets forth our identification with Christ – Romans 6:3–5). Jesus identified himself with sinful mankind by taking human flesh and this is symbolised in his baptism. God the Father laid our sin upon him and *made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him* (2 Corinthians 5:21; cp. Isaiah 53:6). The Lord Jesus also spoke of a baptism and cup of suffering that he had to endure (12:50). His baptism not only symbolised his identification with us, but also his suffering and death to take away our sin.

We see the involvement of the whole Trinity in the baptism of Jesus. As the Son came up from the water, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove upon him and the Father spoke from heaven, *'You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased'* (21–22). The Father loves the Son (John 3:35) but did not spare him as he died for sinners (Romans 8:32). We are much aware of our own sinfulness and shortcomings, but if we are saved, we are 'in Christ' and we are clothed in his righteousness. **The Father accepted his perfect sacrifice so that we could be 'accepted in the Beloved' (Ephesians 1:6). Let us rejoice and give thanks for our wonderful salvation.**

The Genealogy of Jesus Christ (Luke 3:23–38)

Many commentators believe that the family tree in these verses is that of Mary and not of Joseph whose genealogy is found in Matthew chapter 1. Luke is at pains to point out that Joseph was not the natural father of Jesus. In the AV and NKJV, words which are not in the Greek manuscripts are in italics. Verse 23 can thus be translated, 'being (as was supposed) son of Joseph, of Heli.'

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire

The powerful preaching of John was having a great effect upon the people and there was an air of expectation among them. They wondered whether John was the promised Messiah but he denied this and told them that there was One coming who was mightier than himself. John baptised with water but he said of Jesus, *'He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire'* (15–16). This prediction of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (cp. Acts 1:4–8).

There is probably a connection here with Malachi 3:1–3 and thus the Holy Spirit is seen as purging and refining the life of the believer to make him more holy. Those who refuse the fire of cleansing will ultimately suffer the fire of eternal punishment (17). John's prophecy finds its ultimate fulfilment at the second coming of the Lord Jesus who will then cleanse the earth with fire (2 Peter 3:7,11–13).

Everyone who repents of their sin and trusts in Christ is baptized in the Spirit (Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 12:13). The disciples waited for the promise of the Father (Acts 1:4) but we do not need to tarry or agonise for the coming of the Holy Spirit into our lives. We do not have to seek for a 'second blessing' because every believer has the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9; Galatians 4:6). Those who follow the Lord Jesus and seek to please him will enjoy many blessings. **Let us live as those whose bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), rather than chasing after blessings.**

John fearlessly rebuked Herod for stealing his brother Philip's wife and for his evil deeds. Herod refused to heed God's messenger and had John thrown into prison (19–20). Herod eventually had John murdered. He silenced God's messenger, but he could not silence his conscience (Mark 6:14–29).

Arise, shine; for your light has come!

This chapter speaks of the restoration of the exiles from their captivity in Babylon and of the rebuilding of Jerusalem. 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. She would become radiant and her heart would *swell with joy* (4–5). 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).

Bear fruits worthy of repentance

John preached powerfully and fearlessly to great crowds, among whom were Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees prided themselves on their religious zeal, and the Sadducees denied the resurrection of the dead. They were religious, but lost! John was forthright in his preaching, saying, '*Brood of vipers! Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*' (7; cp. Matthew 3:6).

What were the themes of John's preaching? He preached concerning the wrath of God, judgment and the necessity of repentance for the remission of sins (3,7,10). These vital doctrines are missing from many professed evangelical pulpits today. Ryle writes, 'Let us never be ashamed to avow our firm belief, that there is a *wrath to come* for the impenitent, and that it is possible for a man to be lost as well as to be saved. To be silent on the subject is positive treachery to men's souls. It only encourages them to persevere in wickedness, and fosters in their minds the devil's old delusion, "Ye shall not surely die"' (EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON LUKE, vol.1, page 90).

John told those who came to be baptized that they must not rely on their Jewish pedigree for salvation. They must '*bear fruits worthy of repentance*' (8). Repentance is a radical change of mind and heart which changes the direction of our lives. This is seen in John's response to those who asked, '*What shall we do then?*' (10–14). Their repentance had to be seen in a self-denying, honest and contented way of life. If you say that you have repented of your sin, but continue to lead a sinful, self-centred way of life, you must question whether your repentance is truly genuine. Ryle comments, 'It can never be impressed on our minds too strongly that religious talking and profession are utterly worthless, without religious doing and practice' (EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON LUKE, vol.1, page 91). **Have you truly repented of your sins? Does it show in your life by *fruits worthy of repentance*?**

The word of God came to John ... in the wilderness

Jesus was probably born towards the end of 5 BC (the calendar has been changed since those times, hence the date of Christ's birth being 'Before Christ'). Herod the Great, who plotted to murder the infant Christ, died in 4 BC. After his death, his kingdom was divided. The names of the rulers over this divided kingdom at the time when John the Baptist began his ministry are given in verse 1. The Roman emperor is also named as well as the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. Annas had been deposed long before, but he was still functioning with the official high priest, Caiaphas (2).

John began his ministry at a bleak time in Israel's history. The nation had not had a prophet for 400 years. Pontius Pilate, Herod and the high priests were evil men. J.C. Ryle observes, 'Let us learn never to despair about the cause of God's truth, however black and unfavourable its prospects may appear. At the very time when things seem hopeless, God may be preparing a mighty deliverance ... The darkest hour of the night is often that which precedes the day. Let us beware of slacking our hands from any work of God, because of the wickedness of the times, or the number and power of our adversaries' (EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON LUKE, vol.1, page 84).

The Lord Jesus was about thirty years of age when he began his public ministry (23). John the Baptist began preaching shortly before (William Hendriksen suggests about six months earlier, probably AD 26). The work of John the Baptist in preparing the way for Jesus was prophesied in the Old Testament (4–6; cp. Isaiah 40:3–5). John had a message from God: *The word of God came to John ... in the wilderness* (2; cp. 1:80). He preached *a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins* (3). We live in difficult and uncertain times and many of our evangelical churches struggle without pastors. There is a desperate need for leaders who are full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, men who are zealous for Christ, to preach the gospel and to plant churches. **Let us pray that the word of God will come to many people and that the Lord will raise up pastors and evangelists.**

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 will repeat 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)

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).**

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!**

Who is this who comes from Edom?

The prophet sees 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. The prophet asks two questions:

1. *'Who is this who comes from Edom?'* (1). The man 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. Isaiah now asks the warrior, *'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 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).

See also Kelly's hymn, 'Who is this that comes from Edom?'

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 of the LORD and the praises of the LORD'* (7). Why should we praise God? He has bestowed great goodness upon us *according to his mercies, according to the multitude of his lovingkindnesses*.

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 (14).

Christian, think about the goodness of God to you. He has pitied you and had mercy on you, saving you from your sin. 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 is there a 'but' in your life? God has been good to you, he has never failed you, but you are grieving the Holy Spirit through coldness of heart and sin. Have you become like those who have never known Christ or his rule in their lives (19)? Do you complain more than you give thanks to God? Oh, remember the goodness of God and repent of your sin! You will never know lasting satisfaction and peace until your heart is right with God and the Holy Spirit is not grieved by your life. 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.

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).

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)

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). God was remote from the people and his judgment on them 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 is angry with sinners. This is denied by many who profess to be evangelical and is rarely heard from our pulpits. 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 be 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!’* **Do you know what it is to take hold of God in prayer, to intercede and to plead with him for his church and for needy sinners?**

Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth

The Lord responded to the prayer of the prophet by pointing out that he had been sought and found by people from heathen nations. Israel had continued in rebellion, however (1–2; quoted in Romans 10:20–21). This should encourage us in our prayers and in our witness to those who appear to be indifferent to the gospel message.

The people of Judah had provoked God to anger by offering sacrifices in gardens (i.e. worship under trees, derived from Canaanite religion, 3). They also indulged in dark occult practices among the tombs and ate unclean meat (5). 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 sin choose to do evil. They are in a dreadful state, and are unwilling and unable to answer when God speaks to them (11–12).

God did have his elect remnant in Judah who sought him and they were marked out for blessing (9–10). Their happy future is contrasted with the fearful future of the wicked (13–16). The Lord is *the God of truth* (16) and he will keep his word, both threats and promises. He will surely repay the wicked for their sins (6–7) but there is a bright tomorrow for believers.

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!** The themes in these verses are taken up in the New Testament (2 Peter 3:10–13; Revelation 21:1–5). There will be no more death, no more sorrow or crying and we shall be safe for ever. Have you turned from your sins to follow the Lord Jesus Christ? It is folly to reject God’s offers of mercy. Tomorrow will be too late!

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).

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?

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 and for idolaters. 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). Those who have the outward trappings of religion but who love their sin rather than walking in God’s ways are no better than pagan idol worshippers (3–4; cp. 65:12). 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 (6–12).

These verses challenge us concerning our attitude to the word of God. The prophet addresses those *who tremble at his word* (5; cp verse 2). 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 word of God (Psalm 119:105, 140; John 14:15).

We should tremble at the word of God because it is the word of the holy and glorious Creator. When he speaks, we must listen with attentive and obedient hearts. Many who profess to love the Lord do not tremble at his word. **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*'? The hand of God is his powerful working for his own glory and on behalf of his people. The hand of God is:

- A powerful hand doing wonders (15; cp. Exodus 3:20; 13:3; 1 Samuel 5:6; Ezekiel 1:3; Acts 11:21).
- 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 (Psalm 104:27–28; 145:16).

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?**

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.**

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).

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

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|--|---|----------------|
| 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.

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 Zacchaeus 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.**