

Christmas 2025 Part 1

There are two important yearly Christian holidays: Easter, or Resurrection Sunday, and Christmas. These holidays mirror the important doctrines of the resurrection and the virgin birth. Those two doctrines are essential to Christianity. The resurrection points to the life after physical death. It is a doctrine taught in association with salvation. If there were no resurrection, then the assumption would be there is no eternal life. The virgin birth guaranteed a sin free redeemer. Christ had to be sinless when He went to the cross. The virgin birth guaranteed that He started out without the imputation of Adam's sin and no sin nature inherited from His father Joseph.

We are not meeting on Christmas Day. This lesson is being presented on the Sunday before Christmas. This lesson is based on the holiday of Christmas focused on the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. Yet, this is not just a replay. The emphasis will be different.

Last year the lesson centered on the Gospel of Matthew, in my mind at least. This year, the message is focused on the Gospel of Luke. Since there is an extensive narrative on John the Baptist, an extensive portion of the lesson will center on his importance and his interaction with Jesus at the baptism.

The author, Luke, was Paul's physician. But he was also a keen observer. He researched and gathered information about Jesus Christ and wrote it down. The first four verses comprise a single sentence.

Luke 1:1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us,

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Luke 1:2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,

There were apparently accounts of events of this time available to Luke. Eye witness accounts. Some have speculated that these might have included the gospels of Mark and Matthew. Luke does not say. He does say that there was existing documentation available to him. He used it under the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit.

Luke 1:3 it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus;

Investigated everything carefully. Luke was a true historian. He investigated. He did so carefully and accurately. Luke was not one of the original disciples. Being associated with Paul, Luke learned many things either directly from Paul or from associates of Paul who had been eye witnesses of Jesus' ministry.

Someone once said that a chronology is just a listing or narrative of events. History is a narrative with a purpose. Luke has a purpose here. He states that his purpose is so that Theophilus will know the truth. But like the other gospel accounts, it is to proclaim the truth of Jesus' journey to the cross. The epistles explain the results of that journey.

Consecutive order. From Biblehub.com:

“The adverb translated “in orderly sequence” or “successively” signals deliberate arrangement—whether of narrative events, geographic movement, or prophetic testimony. Its appearance is confined to the

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writings of Luke and establishes his concern for an accurate, sequential presentation of God's redemptive work.¹

It is interesting to note that Luke explains not just where he got information, in a general way, but also how he organized his material and presented it.

Luke 1:4 so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

Luke wrote his gospel during the dispensation of Grace/Church. The narrative is set in the dispensation of the Law. Most of the narrative comes before the cross.

That you may know. Purpose clause. The purpose is so that you may know. That was an important aspect of Paul's teaching: knowing.

Wuest's translation of the first four verses is provided to emphasize the meticulous documentation that Luke consciously provided.

“Since it is well known and a fact of importance that many have undertaken to draw up in its historical sequence a narrative of events concerning which there has been a wide diffusion of knowledge among us, even as they delivered them to us for safekeeping, those who from the beginning were personal witnesses of and ministered the Word, it seemed good to me also, having traced the course of all things from the beginning in the minutest detail, to write to you in a consecutive order, Your Excellency, Theophilus, in order that you may come to have a full and accurate experiential knowledge concerning the undoubted truth of the matters in which you were instructed.”²

1 <https://biblehub.com/greek/2517.htm>

2 Kenneth Samuel Wuest (1961). Wuest's expanded translation of the Greek New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans. Page 125

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Wow. That seems so much clearer and impactful than the normal English translations.

Something to keep in mind. Luke wrote this gospel account in the dispensation of the Church to Church Age believers. But, the events happened in the dispensation of the Law. But I already said that.

Luke starts his narrative with John the Baptizer. Why? We have to read that part of the narrative to find out.

Luke 1:5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

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Division of Abijah. The priests were divided into “divisions” by lot in 1 Chronicles 24. It was a way to order the priests so they could be scheduled to work. All the priests did not work all the time. These divisions provided an organization. The following table was excerpted from Wikipedia³.

Division	Name
First	Jehoiarib
Second	Jedaiah
Third	Harim
Fourth	Seorim
Fifth	Malchijah
Sixth	Mijamin
Seventh	Hakkoz
Eighth	Abijah
Ninth	Jeshua
Tenth	Shecaniah
Eleventh	Eliashib
Twelfth	Jakim
Thirteenth	Huppah
Fourteenth	Jeshebeab
Fifteenth	Bilgah
Sixteenth	Immer
Seventeenth	Hezir
Eighteenth	Happizzez
Nineteenth	Pethahiah
Twentieth	Jehezkel
Twenty-first	Jachin
Twenty-second	Gamul
Twenty-third	Delaiah
Twenty-fourth	Maaziah

Wife from the daughters of Aaron. Elizabeth was also from a priestly family. By including that information, Luke has emphasized “priestly.”

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Priestly_divisions

Luke 1:6 They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.

Luke 1:7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.

Note that they had no child because Elizabeth was barren and they were both advanced in years. The situation was similar to Hannah's plight in 1 Samuel chapter 1. Same situation that Abraham and Sarah were in back in Genesis 15. God is going to give them a promise of a child just like He did for Abraham. So this child is important in God's plan. Some of us were "not planned." We "just happened." But certain specified children were planned, not just by the parents, but by God Himself. John was important.

Remember. Genesis is the first book in the Bible and in the Torah. The first book. And here is a link to it. The miraculous pregnancy and birth. It is not miraculous just because Elizabeth, being barren, became pregnant. Both her pregnancy here and Sarah's pregnancy in Genesis were announced via angelic messenger.

Luke 1:8 Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division,

Luke 1:9 according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

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Choosing someone for a task by lot was an acceptable practice in the dispensation of the Law. Peter does this in Acts chapter 2 prior to Pentecost.

Here is some helpful commentary by Thomas Constable:

“Zechariah was serving God faithfully by discharging some temple function as a member of his priestly division. According to Josephus there were four courses (divisions) of the priests, and each one had more than 5,000 priests in it. These courses were broken down into 24 smaller sections, each of which would serve in the temple on rotation during two separate weeks each year. When a section was on duty all of its members were responsible to appear in the temple. There were so many priests in Zechariah's day that the great privilege of offering incense on the golden incense altar in the temple fell to a priest only once in his lifetime. It was a great privilege to stand before the incense altar in the holy place, because this was as close to the Holy of Holies as any non-high priest could get. The priests decided who would offer incense at the daily sacrifice, morning and evening, by casting lots. Obviously God providentially arranged for Zechariah's selection (cf. Esth. 3:7; Prov. 16:33). This occasion was undoubtedly a high point in his life and the greatest honor of his priestly career.”⁴

Luke has set a physical and spiritual context here. Unless we have an inkling of knowledge about the temple and incense, we miss it.

Here is some information from gotquestions.org

“God assigned the high priest the role of burning this exact blend on the altar of incense. The altar played a vital role in the daily and yearly worship activities that symbolized Israel’s relationship with God. Made of acacia wood and overlaid with gold, the altar measured three feet high

4 Thomas Constable, Notes on Luke 2025 Edition page 33-34. <https://soniclight.com/tcon/notes/pdf/luke.pdf>

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and was eighteen inches square, featuring a horn on each corner. It stood in the Holy Place, the outermost room of the tabernacle, directly in front of the entrance to the innermost room, the Holy of Holies (Exodus 30:1–6).”

“The high priest burned incense twice daily, once before the morning sacrifice and again after the evening sacrifice (Exodus 30:7–8). Additionally, on the Day of Atonement, a special ceremony involving incense took place. The high priest entered the Holy of Holies with incense burning in a censer, creating a protective cloud of smoke over the mercy seat—the cover of the ark of the covenant. The smoke symbolized the prayers of the people and protected the high priest from the direct presence of God, ensuring his survival (Leviticus 16:12–13).⁵”

To get an idea of where the altar of incense was, the following temple layout is copied from biblestudy.org⁶ It was right in front of the holy of holies.

Also important is to realize that incense sometimes symbolized prayer.

Psalm 141:1 O Lord, I call upon You; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to You!

Psalm 141:2 May my prayer be counted as incense before You; The lifting up of my hands as the evening offering.

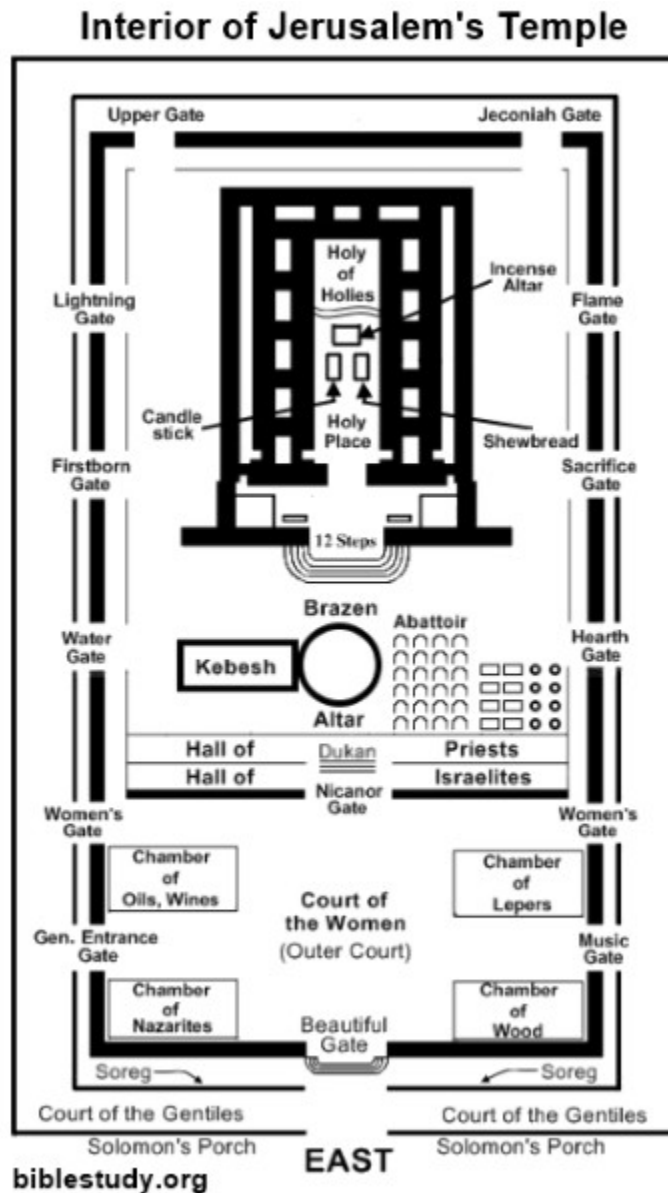
Revelation 5:8 When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one

⁵ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Bible-incense.html>

⁶ <https://www.biblestudy.org/biblepic/interior-design-of-jerusalem-temple.jpg>

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holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.



Luke 1:10 And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.

Luke 1:11 And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense.

We learn further on in this chapter (verse 19) that this is the angel Gabriel. Subsequently (verse 26) Gabriel is sent to Marry. He also was sent by God to Daniel in the Old Testament. An important angel.

Sitting in our chair at home or in church, we might say, “OK an angel appeared to him. Unusual but not unheard of in the Old Testament.”

Consider this. You are concentrating on something, perhaps you are writing an e-mail to someone. You are concentrating. All of a sudden someone is standing right next to you. Boom!!! It takes your breath away. Your heart is racing. It takes a few seconds or more to acclimate to the presence of someone or something. For Zechariah, he didn't expect anyone or anything to be in the holy place. We know that anyone that went into the Holy of Holies in a state of sin would die instantly. In some cases, a rope was tied around the waist of a priest, just in case. If he died someone could pull him out without dying himself. This was serious business. Life and death potentially. And then an angelic being appears like lightning. Am I going to die!!??

Luke 1:12 Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him.

Zacharias was not “troubled.” He was terrified. It's like someone in a movie who thinks they just woke up from a terrible dream only to find out it is real! The thoughts that must have gone through Zacharias' mind. I am trying to give you an inkling of the intensity of what happened to Zacharias.

Luke 1:13 But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.

Petition. Zacharias had a prayer petition. He pleaded with God for a child. Now at the altar of incense, where incense is compared to prayer, the angel Gabriel says God has answered Zacharias’ prayer.

Has been heard. Talk about answered prayer!

John. In the Hebrew, the name means “Yahweh is gracious.” In this instance, Zacharias and his wife’s petition was being fulfilled and dovetailed into God’s plan.

What happened in the temple to Zacharias was etched into his mind. It was something he would never forget.

Have you ever been in a car accident or something similar in which time seemed to slow down? Something like that probably happened to Zacharias. Since only the angel and Zacharias were present in the temple space at that time, we have Zacharias’ account of what happened. As I said, this event was etched into his mind.

Luke 1:14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.

Luke 1:15 For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother’s womb.

While yet in his mother’s womb. If this was to be translated as “in” I would have expected a different preposition. Here it is “*ek*” which would

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indicate “out from.” But, even Wuest who is very literal, translates this the same as the NIV. The NIV and NET translations use “even before his birth.” A question then becomes, at what point did John receive a human soul?

Luke 1:16 And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.

This points to John’s ministry to turn Israel back to the Lord.

Luke 1:17 It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

The purpose is made clear in Luke ... He was to turn the Jews back to God. The purpose was to prepare them for the kingdom.

1. The narrative of John’s birth and mission are documented extensively in the gospels. That means this narrative is important for the readers. For Christians. However, today, we may miss this importance since we do not live in the ancient world of kings and kingdoms.
2. John quotes Isaiah 40 to identify who he was. He was the “forerunner” to the Messiah. He was the “herald” of the coming king. Daniel prophesied the coming and time of the Messiah. People were expectant.

(Disciples discussed, he is the one. Also the people in the temple).

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Luke 2:25 And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

Luke 2:26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ (translation from Hebrew word for Messiah/Anointed One).

Now in John chapter 1, the future disciples found the one prophesied in Moses and the Prophets. Scripture was being fulfilled in front of them.

John 1:43 The next day He purposed to go into Galilee, and He *found Philip. And Jesus *said to him, "Follow Me."

John 1:44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, of the city of Andrew and Peter.

John 1:45 Philip *found Nathanael and *said to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

John 1:46 Nathanael said to him, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Philip *said to him, "Come and see."

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Were Jesus to just come on the scene without notice, people might have had a more difficult time accepting Him. Because of John the Baptizer, people were expectant. He prepared them. John the preparer. We know that the Magi knew the time and sign of the Messiah. Daniel had a timetable given to him. People could calculate and know that the Messiah was near.

3. Luke narrates the instructions from the angel Gabriel. John was to “turn his people back to God.”
4. Note also the miraculous birth. It echoes the miraculous birth of Isaac. So, in a way, this narrative links John the Baptizer back to Abraham and Sarah.

Note the mention of God the Holy Spirit. Like Elijah.

5. Then Zechariah quotes from Malachi. Interesting: from Genesis/Abraham to Malachi. So we are looking at fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy. From beginning to end.
6. Once the father of John can speak, after John is born, he also provides prophecy about his son.

Luke 1:26 Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth,

Luke 1:27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

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Virgin. This is an oblique reference to Isaiah 7:14

Isaiah 7:14 Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.

Virgin. The Hebrew word signifies an unmarried woman. The rabbis understood this to mean virgin in this context. The LXX translates the word into a Greek word that means virgin.

Luke 1:28 And coming in, he said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

Luke 1:29 But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was.

Luke 1:30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God.

Luke 1:31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus.

Luke 1:32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David;

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Luke 1:33 and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.”

Here is a clear reference to the Davidic Covenant which is paragraph 2 of the Abrahamic Covenant. God documented the promise/prophesy. He then announces the coming fulfillment of that prophecy. Then the fulfillment of the prophecy is documented.

And the kingdom will have no end. At the end of the Millennium, the kingdom continues into eternity.

Here is something to ponder until next week when we conclude this Christmas special with the baptism of Jesus.

The Importance of the Baptism of Jesus.

It is important at the start to clearly state that the Baptism of Jesus, even though performed by John the Baptist, was not “John’s Baptism.” John’s baptism was for those who needed a change of mind (sometimes mistranslated as repent) because of sin in the life. Jesus was perfect. And His baptism was unique and very meaningful.

1. God’s Plan. Jesus was identified with God’s plan for His life.
2. Angelic Conflict. Jesus was qualified to perform the mission given to Him. From man’s perspective, John performed the mechanics of the baptism. Man says Jesus is ready. From the God-Man’s perspective Jesus was announcing that He met all the requirements to start the mission. Jesus is ready. God the Father announced His satisfaction with Jesus’ qualifications subsequent to the baptism. Jesus is ready. Following that the Devil, perhaps begrudgingly agreed that Jesus was qualified as a result of the tempting of Jesus in the desert (wilderness).
3. Jesus was fulfilling prophecy. John identified his mission by quoting from Isaiah 40:1-4//Isaiah 40:1-4//Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:2-3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23
4. John was by descent a priest. His father was a functional priest. His mother was from priestly family. As such, John can present the holy sacrifice provided by God but who is a man. A perfect man with no spot or blemish.
5. Overlapping with other points is the fact that Jesus by descent was royalty and a future king, both from a human perspective and from the divine perspective. As is often stated in commentaries, John the Baptist was the herald, or announcer/proclaimer of Israel’s king.

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These points are not ones that are encountered in all the commentaries. Sometimes only one or two of them are evident. Certainly the Angelic Conflict perspective is not expressed in any commentaries I ran across.