

Big idea: This is no accident, fluke or impossibility but the plan of God.

FCF:

Application:

1. Impossible, accident, fluke?

How do you react when something amazing, outside your experience, beyond what you think is reasonable or normal, happens?

Some people, especially those who have not seen the event, will dismiss it as 'Impossible!'. Others will look at it, accept that it might have happened, and then dismiss it as 'That's an accident!', or, 'What a fluke!'

Add into that mix the fact that such an event happened centuries before you live, in a part of the world you have never visited, in a culture that you have never experienced... What do you say? Would it still be relevant?

PRAY...

Theophilus is doubting the truth of what he has been taught about Jesus. Whether because of social pressures, family pressures, community pressures, or work pressures, he – a Roman official – is starting to doubt the truth about Jesus. Luke, a doctor and companion of the Apostle Paul, investigates a stack of eyewitness accounts, and compiles a straightforward history of the life and

times of Jesus – to reassure Theophilus of the certainty of what he has been taught about Jesus. And he starts from the beginning...

READ Luke 1:5-38...

2. Setting the scene...

Luke does as he said he would – he begins with ‘the very first’: he starts with the births of two boys. Well, he actually starts before then, with the prediction of the births of two boys.

If you take a bird’s eye view here, there are two birth narratives – Luke lays them out, intertwining them – we will come to that in a moment. They each mirror each other – we meet the characters, the scene is set, an angel appears (Gabriel in both cases) and speaks to them, there are questions, there is an aftermath, and a fulfilment (at least in one instance!).

There is so much here. I mean, we could look at this from the obvious angle of one of God’s people, at the time, dealing with the dust lying on the promises of God. We could draw out themes and ideas that a Roman public office-holder might find encouraging. We could deal with the threads way back into the Old Testament. All would be profitable...

But, today, I want to make four observations about this section that should reassure us of the basic truth about Jesus Christ, and what he means...

3. Be reassured...

Observation 1 – this is good history.

Luke actually does what he says he would – he writes a carefully examined history.

We are given a timeframe – this is during the time of King Herod's rule in Judea – somewhere towards the end of the period 37-4BC.

We are given a location – Judea, Jerusalem and the hill country that surrounds it.

We are given characters that are verifiable, at the time.

There is a priest who serves in a certain division, at a certain time. The time we are in is the pinnacle of his priestly career – the burning of incense was a once-in-your-life-as-priest occasion. The records could be checked.

We have his wife's name and her background.

We are given their details so that we know that it is THAT Zechariah and Elizabeth.

We have a cloud of witnesses – 'the whole assembly of the people' – that can be interviewed.

We are given details that speak of investigation by Luke with Zechariah and Elizabeth – a one-on-one chat with an angel, the

account of the angel, the reaction of Zechariah (hardly edifying that a priest doubt the God he had prayed to).

We are given the timeframe for the pregnancy of Elizabeth – when Zechariah returned from Jerusalem.

Then, further time frames – six months later, the second birth prediction.

Again, we are given a location, names, lineage and a timeframe. We are given details so that we know which Joseph and which Mary (a relative of Elizabeth). We are given details that only an investigation, an interview by Luke, could turn up.

It all smacks of good history! And history that Theophilus could investigate and examine – after all, he had all the skills of the Roman public service at his disposal.

Observation 2 – parallelism

Luke has given us an orderly and historical account. But remember his bias: God's plans being fulfilled. And so Luke has written this as a parallel birth prediction – we are meant to read this side-by-side and compare the announcements of the births of John and Jesus.

There are many similarities: significant natural impediments to conception; both by Gabriel; both announcements follow the same pattern; similar reactions.

But there are also significant differences:

- The baby to be called John will operate as a prophet, and he comes from a family of priests. Both these Old Testament offices are about preparing God's people, and getting them ready for God. The baby to be called Jesus, however, will be a king, descended from David – he is the long-awaited for, and promised, saviour of the people of God.
- Zechariah and Elizabeth suffer from being barren. Barren, godly and elderly families in the Bible are usually significant – just think of Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebekah and the parents of Samuel. But, Mary is a whole different kettle of fish – she is a young virgin. That is something that is impossible!

Both boys are special – any birth is, and these births too. But like anyone else born on the same day as George, the Prince of Cambridge, one is more special – one will serve the other. John will serve Jesus, preparing the way for the coming of God's Saviour. Luke writes so we see that comparison.

Observation 3 – the emphasis on fulfilment

As Luke recounts the words of Gabriel to Zechariah and Mary, we must notice the emphasis on fulfilment. After all, this is Luke's bias.

Listen again to Gabriel's words to Zechariah about John – **Luke 1:13-17... READ.**

Gabriel explicitly quotes the last prophet in the Old Testament, Malachi; specifically, he quotes **Malachi 4:5-6... READ.**

God's long-awaited promise to prepare his people for his coming has come about – John will do that job.

So, when we turn to the next announcement, we should not be surprised when the baby Jesus is surrounded by even bigger fulfilment – **Luke 1:26-33... READ.**

He is born of a virgin, like Isaiah 7 said; he is born in the family of David and will rule on David's throne, like 2 Samuel 7 said; he will be the Son of God, like 2 Samuel 7 and Isaiah 9 said; and his rule, and kingdom will never end, like Isaiah 9 said. Moreover, as the one following close on heels of John, the 'Elijah-like' figure sent to prepare the way, we are meant to go, 'Aha, that means that this one is God himself!'

Observation 4 – the focus is on God

Both Zechariah and Mary have significant issues with the announcements they receive. Their doubts are different.

Zechariah rightly is judged for his – after all, he had prayed, and asked; he was a man steeped in the Old Testament, marinated in its promises, given the job of leading God's people in trusting God to do as he promised – why should he then doubt when he is given an answer? He asks for a sign when he should have known better.

Mary, however, doesn't doubt the fact of the matter – she asks a reasonable question, in the context of God's law, about the morality of the matter. Mary asks for reassurance, given her

obvious fear of accusation. Moreover, whereas God delivering babies to barren women was part of the Old Testament fabric, a virgin was something completely out of left-field.

Gabriel's response to Mary is, I think, the heart of Luke's account here. It is the heart because it is here that Theophilus – and us – receive the certainty that Luke writes to instil. Look at **Luke 1:37... READ.**

Whilst the historical facts focus on the humans, the most significant figure in these verses is God. It is his action that brings both conceptions about. It is his messenger who delivers the news. Those are his promises that stand behind both babies – that his messenger would come to prepare the people for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. There is no doubt that this is an account of God's action – and it is not impossible. It just needs God to act.

4. Impossible? Accident? Fluke? No!

Faced by something that seems too outrageous, too hard to explain, too beyond what I expect possible or deem reasonable, our default response is to dismiss it as impossible, an accident, or a fluke.

Whilst such a response is understandable, it does not deal with what we have in front of us today. Luke has written such an account that we cannot deny its truth, we cannot dismiss it as an accident, a fluke, or impossible – it is written there in the pages of history, pages that a man like Theophilus could check, investigate and examine. We might not be able to do the same, but the facts

remain: God had acted to do exactly as he promised: to come into the world to deal with its brokenness. There is nothing random, abstract, or accidental here.

Now, if we cannot dismiss it, or deride it, our doubt it, we have to decide what to do with it, how to respond to it...

One response is to regard it as irrelevant, a myth that has been used to create an abiding social tradition that builds up families and communities and allows the expression of generosity and hospitality. Again, on one level, I can understand that, but it does not deal with what we have just seen: this is good history, showing what God has done. Such a response is understandable but untenable.

A second response might be that of Zechariah. Here was a man, as we have said, steeped in the promises of God, but he just couldn't grasp how those promises could happen. So, when they did start to unfold, he couldn't quite work out what to do with them. I suspect that there are many who stand with Zechariah at this initial point – they assent to the truth but that they just don't know, or even apply, how that truth is possible.

A third response is the one that Luke is aiming for – be assured that what you have been taught about Jesus is true and certain. And I suspect that Mary sits in this camp – she knows the truth and she submits to the truth. If this is true, then the truths to be applied to us are significant: God does as he promises; God has intervened in this world to deal with our broken state, with our sin; God has sent the king of the whole universes and all time; God prepared humans for this moment.

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Passage: Luke 1:5-38

That is what we remembering, each Christmas, each year. And we can be certain about it.