

# THE MESSENGER PREPARED

## CORE PASSAGE: LUKE 1:5-17

### CONTEXT

In the four hundred years between the closing of the Old Testament (Malachi) and the opening of the New Testament (the Gospels), many world powers and leaders shaped Jewish culture and religious life. When the book of Luke opens, Herod the Great ruled Judea and the surrounding regions. Though a descendant of Esau, Herod was appointed as king of the Jews by Rome and ruled ruthlessly. The priesthood largely became corrupt during the intertestamental period. But Zechariah was faithful to his role as priest, and along with his wife, Elizabeth, he continued to be faithful to Israel's covenant with God.

### KEY CONCEPT

**God will send messengers to prepare His way.**

As you examine Luke 1:5-17:

- Recognize how God's miracle of giving Zechariah and Elizabeth a son recalls similar miracles in the Old Testament.
- Consider how their son, John, fulfilled God's promise to send someone in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way for Jesus.



## TIMELINE

Malachi Prophesies the Messenger to Prepare the Way for the Lord (Malachi 3–4)

Nehemiah Returns and Rebuilds the Wall Around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1–6)

The Intertestamental Period

Ezra the Priest Returns to Judah and Instructs the People in the Law (Ezra 7–10)

Ezra Reads the Book of the Law and the People Confess Their Sin (Nehemiah 8–12)

**SESSION STUDY:** An Angel Foretells the Birth of John the Baptist, Who Prepares the Way for the Messiah (Luke 1)

### Daily Readings

- Day 1:** Luke 1:1–4
- Day 2:** Luke 1:5–25
- Day 3:** Luke 1:26–38
- Day 4:** Luke 1:39–56
- Day 5:** Luke 1:57–80
- Day 6:** Psalm 65



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## PERSONAL PREPARATION

LUKE 1:5-13

### GOD PREPARED THE WAY THROUGH THE PROVISION OF A SON.

*Highlight the description of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Underline the message the angel gave Zechariah.*

**5** In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest of Abijah's division named Zechariah. His wife was from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. **6** Both were righteous in God's sight, living without blame according to all the commands and requirements of the Lord. **7** But they had no children because Elizabeth could not conceive, and both of them were well along in years. **8** When his division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, **9** it happened that he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. **10** At the hour of incense the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. **11** An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. **12** When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified and overcome with fear. **13** But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.

## GOSPEL CONNECTION

God is not abrupt in His ways but has planned all along to send a Savior for His people. That includes sending messengers to prepare the way to ready hearts to receive Him.



Luke starts off his Gospel telling Theophilus that he is writing “so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed” (1:4). And with that, he started with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, a priest and his wife, who also was from a priestly line. Both lived righteously before God, yet they had no children as Elizabeth was barren and they were both older. Luke was setting up the story knowing that this narrative would fulfill prophecy.

In verse 9, Zechariah was chosen by lot for a priestly responsibility. It may seem that this was all happening by luck or chance, but God’s providence was truly at work, for in that one moment of Zechariah burning incense in the sanctuary, God sent an angel to him with a message.

**What recent event initially seemed like a matter of luck, but now you can see God’s providential hand in it?**



Like anyone would be, Zechariah was “terrified and overcome with fear” (v. 12). God had been silent for over four hundred years, and here an angel of the Lord appeared to him. The angel’s message, however, was one of encouragement, telling Zechariah, “Do not be afraid,” because his prayer had been heard, and his wife would bear them a son (v. 13).

But note that God didn’t give Zechariah and Elizabeth a child to reward their “good behavior”; this wasn’t a reward for their blamelessness. He chose them to participate in His plan of redemption. By withholding a child until His chosen time, God defied society’s belief that to be barren meant there was some underlying sin in a woman’s past. God looks on barrenness throughout Scripture with gentleness and care, especially in the face of societal shame. In cases like Sarah (Genesis 12; 17; 21; Hebrews 11:11), Rebekah (Genesis 25:21), Rachel (Genesis 29:31; 30:1), Hannah (1 Samuel 1), and Elizabeth, God didn’t give children to elevate these women in society’s eyes but to demonstrate His ability to accomplish His covenant promises.

**How do you view the God-given gifts in your life: as rewards or as God’s faithfulness to His Word? Why does this matter?**

## PERSONAL PREPARATION

LUKE 1:14-17

### THIS SON WOULD PREPARE THE PEOPLE FOR THE COMING MESSIAH.

*Circle each future-tense verb in the passage.*

**14** “There will be joy and delight for you, and many will rejoice at his birth. **15** For he will be great in the sight of the Lord and will never drink wine or beer. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother’s womb. **16** He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. **17** And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people.”

### THEOLOGY CONNECTION

**THE HOLY SPIRIT:** The Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity, possessing the fullness of deity like the Father and Son. His deity can be seen in the fact that He is eternal (Hebrews 9:14), omnipresent (Psalm 139:7-8), the creator and giver of life (Genesis 1:2; Psalm 104:30; John 3:5-7), and directly identified with the triune God (Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14).



John's birth, prayed and longed for by Zechariah and Elizabeth, was also joyful for the many who prayed and longed for the deliverance of God's people. Finally, here was the messenger to the Messenger, foretold four hundred years earlier by the prophet Malachi.

The Greek word for "great" in verse 15 indicates power, authority, or significance. John would be great in the Lord's sight because of the divine power on his life and the divine purpose for which he was chosen (cf. Jeremiah 1:5). Abstaining from wine and beer would be an outward sign of this purpose.

Previously, God had ordained other prophets before they were born (Isaiah 49:1,5; Jeremiah 1:5), but Zechariah's child would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before birth. Pentecost had not happened occurred, so the Holy Spirit didn't dwell in every person who trusted in the Lord. After hundreds of years without any revelation from the Lord, God would give John His Spirit so that no one could ignore the calling on John the Baptist's life.

**How do you see the Holy Spirit's working in your life?**

Luke 1:16-17 recalls Malachi 3:1 and 4:5-6, which speak of the "delight" of the people and the messenger coming like "Elijah" to "turn the hearts of fathers to their children." The passage also recalls Isaiah 40:3, which foretells a voice of one crying out to prepare the way of the Lord. As a priest, Zechariah would have been familiar with the Old Testament and its prophecies, so the significance of Gabriel's words here wouldn't have been lost on him. He would know that the angel was talking about a messenger who was preparing the way for the Messenger, the Messiah.

Even recognizing this prophecy, Zechariah struggled to believe God's power to give him a son. As a result, the angel made him unable to speak until these things happened (Luke 1:18-20). Later, when Zechariah believed and named his son John, he was able to speak again, and then he prophesied by the Holy Spirit and praised God for His faithfulness (vv. 59-79).

**What do you struggle to believe about God, even knowing His Word is true?**

## PREPARE THE WAY

*Research how the New Testament describes some of God's preparations.*

VERSES	SUMMARY
<b>Romans 9:22-24</b>	
<b>2 Corinthians 5:5</b>	
<b>Ephesians 2:10</b>	
<b>Hebrews 11:16</b>	
<b>Revelation 21:1-2</b>	

Which preparation of God are you most thankful for?

How does it make you feel that God thinks you're special enough to prepare these things for you?

**Key Concept:** God will send messengers to prepare His way.



## HEAD

Which of God's gifts have been the most purposeful in your life?

### PRAYING SCRIPTURE



Psalm 65 praises God for His power and provision. As you read, consider the situations you are facing that feel overwhelming or hopeless. Let this psalm guide your prayer and remind you of God's complete control and goodness to His faithful ones.



## HEART

How can you practically acknowledge the gifts God has given you and praise Him for them this week?

### PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES



## HANDS

What can you do to help prepare others to accept the message of the good news of Jesus Christ?



# THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE

By Bob Bunn

On January 13, 1984, President Ronald Reagan issued a proclamation supporting what he dubbed “the sanctity of human life.” Pointing to the deaths of millions of unborn children through legalized abortion, Reagan noted that Americans were “poorer not simply for lives not led and for contributions not made, but also for the erosion of our sense of worth and dignity of every individual.”<sup>1</sup> In response, Reagan proclaimed Sunday, January 22 of that year—the 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion—“National Sanctity of Human Life Day.”

Today, many Christians recognize the importance of protecting the sanctity of human life. Not only is it a matter of life and death for unborn children, but it also underscores the larger truth that all human life is sacred—from the womb to the grave. In the article on “The Christian and Social Order,” the SBC also makes a broader appeal for the universal value of each human life, especially those who cannot defend themselves: “We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death.”<sup>2</sup>

## WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

“Sanctity” can be traced to the Latin word *sanctus*, or “sacred.” So by definition, the sanctity of human life considers every life “sacred” or “set apart” by God for His purposes and plans. That’s exactly what we see in the Scriptures.

Starting with Adam and Eve, human beings are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). While theologians have debated the precise meaning of the *imago dei* (“Image of God”), three things are certain. First, it is unique to humanity. No other aspect of the created order is said to be formed by God’s hand in God’s image. Second, the image of God is a universal trait of each human. All of us—even those who choose to reject God’s mercy and grace—bear His image. Finally, the image of God gives every human value and purpose. Our lives have meaning because we reflect Him.

In the Psalms, we see that the *imago dei* places humans “a little lower than God” and that we are crowned “with glory and honor” (8:5). The Lord has given us authority as His stewards to rule over His creation (vv. 6-8).

Plus, we are “remarkably and wondrously made” by the very hand of God (139:14). He “knit” (a word that implies protection and

security in Hebrew<sup>3</sup>) us in our mother's womb, and nothing in our lives is hidden from Him (vv. 13,15). This underscores our responsibility to view others through the lens of the sanctity of human life.

The sanctity of human life also emphasizes the purposes God has for each individual. Again, the psalmist noted that God knows the course of our days before they even begin (139:16). In addition, the prophet Jeremiah learned that God had set him apart from ministry before his birth (Jeremiah 1:5).

God, the Creator of the universe, knows each of us and has a plan for each of us. But the greatest proof that every human life has value can be found in what is arguably the most familiar verse in all of Scripture. John 3:16 states that God's love for humanity drove Him to make the greatest sacrifice imaginable. He sent His Son to pay the price for our sin. Because Jesus died for humanity, we can affirm the sanctity of all human life.

## WHAT IT MEANS

As noted, the momentum of Sanctity of Human Life Sunday began with a presidential proclamation regarding the unborn. It served as a clarion call to encourage believers to protect the most vulnerable members of society and to take a bold stand against the evils of abortion.

But if we believe God calls us to value and protect every person He has created, believers must consider expanding their definition of the sanctity of human life beyond the single issue of abortion.

In the Old Testament, God sent His people into exile for two primary reasons: idolatry and injustice. Today, we don't have to look far to see how oppression of the helpless and hopeless continues to raise its ugly head. Some discount the value of the elderly, especially those who can no longer actively contribute to society. Racial strife, economic injustice, physical disabilities, and mental illness leave many on the fringes of society.

By and large, these are the people Jesus helped. While He kept the hypocritical religious elite at arm's length, He socialized with the "sinners" as the Great Physician who offered the cure for their deepest needs. He was the rabbi who reached out and touched the lepers and other outcasts with a healing hand. He broke down cultural walls built around ethnic, gender, and social constraints.

Why? All so He could fulfill His messianic call articulated by Isaiah centuries earlier:

To heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of our God's vengeance; to comfort all who mourn. (Isaiah 61:1-2)

Jesus affirmed the sanctity of all human life through His words and actions. He reminds us, as C. S. Lewis stated: "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal."<sup>4</sup> He challenges us to value every human life just as He does.

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Bob Bunn serves on Lifeway's Adult Ongoing Bible Studies team. He and his wife, Mary, live in Nashville and serve at First Baptist Church Nashville.

# REFERENCES

## UNIT 16

### Session 2

1. Augustine of Hippo, quoted in Kenneth Stevenson and Michael Gluerup, eds., *Ezekiel, Daniel: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 183.

### Session 4

1. Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 23, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 155.

## UNIT 18

### Session 1

1. Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), *Ne 2:10–19*.

### Session 3

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## ARTICLES

### The Doctrine of the Kingdom

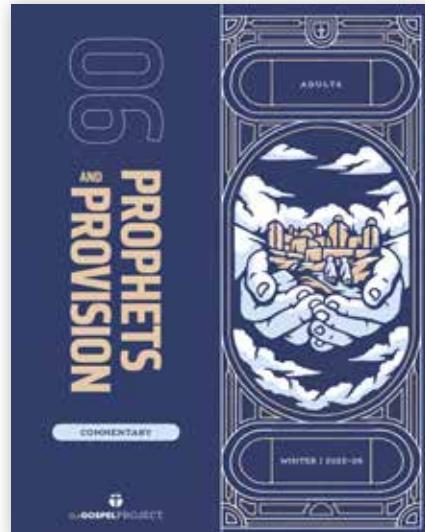
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UNIT 16 • SESSION 1

## OBEDIENCE

CORE PASSAGE: DANIEL 1:8-21

**Context:** In 605 BC, a few short years into King Jehoiakim's reign over Judah, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar took control of Jerusalem, made Judah's king his vassal, and carried off some high-profile young men as exiles to Babylon. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. They were brought to the palace to be educated in Babylonian ways so they could serve their new king. For three years they were trained in all things Babylonian—language, customs, and religion—and faced the temptation of losing their identity as God's people.

**Key Concept:** Obedience to God leads to greater wisdom from God.

### DAILY READINGS

<input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: Daniel 1:1-7	<input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: Daniel 2:14-24
<input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: Daniel 1:8-21	<input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: Daniel 2:25-49
<input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: Daniel 2:1-13	<input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 112

Pursuing obedience to God is always right despite the obstacles (Daniel 1:1-21)

<sup>1</sup> Daniel determined that he would not defile himself with the king's food or with the wine he drank. So he asked permission from the chief eunuch not to defile himself. <sup>2</sup> God had granted Daniel kindness and compassion from the chief eunuch, <sup>3</sup> yet he said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and drink. What if he sees your faces looking thinner than the other young men your age? You would endanger my life with the king." <sup>4</sup> So Daniel said to the guard whom the chief eunuch had assigned to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, <sup>5</sup> "Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. <sup>6</sup> Then examine our appearance and the appearance of the young men who are eating the king's food, and deal with your servants based on what you see." <sup>7</sup> He agreed with them about this and tested them for ten days.

### Obedient Hearts Resist Compromise

In 605 BC, the Lord gave Jerusalem into the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (605–562 BC). God's judgment came because of the kingdom of Judah's persistent unfaithfulness toward God and the terms of His covenant. Nebuchadnezzar took many sacred vessels from Jerusalem's temple to Babylon with him (vv. 1–2). He also commanded the Judean court's best and brightest youths be brought to the palace at Babylon to be trained for three years in the literature and language of the Chaldeans in order to serve the king (vv. 3–5). Among these captives were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, the latter three being



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## PROPHETS AND PROVISION

Throughout the exile of His people, God remained faithful in providing for those who lived in faith, even under persecution. He provided His presence, protection, and prophets to show the world that He is the almighty God. And when the time was right, He allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, to continue right worship, and to rebuild the city because He is a God of restoration. The Lord desires to restore His people to a right relationship with Him. We see this ultimately through His sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to die and rise again. Through His work, people can be restored permanently and adopted into God's family. Despite our sin, which exiles, God provided a way home, and the only way is Jesus.

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