

CHAPTER 1

Preparation for the Coming of Messiah

Luke 1

**Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee:
blessed art thou among women.** (Luke 1:28 Douay-Rheims)

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! (Luke 1:42)

The Whole World Waits for a Savior ~ The entire human race dwelt for millennia in the darkness of sin and death, separated and deprived of intimacy with God. Meanwhile, God sent prophets to the Jewish people to give them hope and prepare them to identify the Redeemer when He arrived. The Gospels are the story of the Messiah's coming. Those who knew Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, best on earth wanted to share the wondrous truth with all the rest of the people on earth.

For twenty years or so after the Resurrection, those who wished to hear about Christ could sit at the feet of the apostles and listen to them. The martyrdom of James in 44 AD sent a shock wave through the early church. Christians had to face the fact that they would not always be able to hear the Gospel directly from the apostles' lips. A scribe, Mark interviewed Peter and wrote a transcript, arguably becoming the first Evangelist. His account starts when Jesus is nearly thirty years old and ready to begin his public ministry—about the time when Peter first met Jesus.

Soon, the apostle Matthew began to write his own account. Having once been a tax collector, he had the skills of a scribe. Since Peter and Matthew shared many experiences, the Gospels of Mark and Matthew have a great deal in common. Matthew recorded not only the adult life of Jesus, which he knew first hand, but also the life of young Jesus, which he knew only second hand. Only because of Matthew do we have knowledge of the angel appearing to Joseph, the visit of three magi, the massacre of the Holy Innocents, and the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt.

Meanwhile, persecution intensified and the apostles were martyred, one after another. In the year 69 AD, the martyrdom of Peter dealt a great blow. The early Christians had to decide how best to continue Peter's ministry of teaching and governance. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, they elected a successor, second in the line of popes, which continues to the present day. They realized even more the importance of the written Gospel for future generations. Another scribe, the physician Luke, took up his pen, and wrote a long two-part work, both a Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. His Gospel begins even earlier than Matthew's, with the annunciation of the conception of John the Baptist. Luke begins his Gospel by paying tribute to the earlier evangelists and acknowledging their contributions.

Luke covers much of the same material as Mark and Matthew. In fact, these three Gospels have so much in common that they can be read side-by-side, or "synoptically." The different details contribute marvelously to a well-rounded picture of the life and message of Jesus. They are like three facets of a single jewel. The subsequent chapters of this study follow the sequence of material in these three Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Occasionally material

from the fourth evangelist, John, who produced a work very different in scope from the other three, will be considered as well.

Chapter One of Luke ~ We rely upon chapter one of Luke alone for our knowledge of three events that take place before the birth of Jesus, over a period of nine months, in three distinct locations:

- The archangel Gabriel announces the birth of John the Baptist to his father Zechariah, in the temple sanctuary in Jerusalem (Luke 1:5–21).
- Six months later the same archangel visits the Virgin Mary at her home in Nazareth and invites her to become the mother of the Messiah (Luke 1:26–38).
- Mary travels to the village of Ain Karem, west of Jerusalem and remains there three months to visit and help her cousin Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife (Luke 1:39–54).

Gabriel Announces the Birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-15) ~ The archangel Gabriel first appears in the pages of Scripture when he delivers a couple of chapter-long messages to the prophet Daniel. He now makes two appearances in Luke 1, one to Zechariah and one to Mary. Gabriel must have appeared in dazzling splendor, because he repeatedly says, “Do not fear” to Daniel and Zechariah and Mary.

The divine revelation given to Zechariah, announcing the birth of John the Baptist, occurs in a very privileged place, the temple mount in Jerusalem. The priest Zechariah was chosen to offer incense inside the temple, in the room *hekel*, which housed the lamp stand and showbread in the tabernacle. A veil separated the innermost holy sanctuary, called *debir*, the “Holy of Holies.” Since there were about twenty thousand priests in the country at the time of Zechariah, divided into groups of roughly one thousand priests each, Zechariah enjoyed a rare privilege in offering the incense that burned in the temple twice a day. People saw the smoke from the outside while they prayed, and that smoke drifting toward heaven symbolized their prayers ascending to God’s throne. Today the temple in Jerusalem where the angel appeared to Zechariah is gone, destroyed by Titus in 70 AD.

Thirty-one Zechariahs are mentioned in Sacred Scripture. The two most important are Zechariah the prophet, who wrote the book of fourteen chapters found in the Old Testament, and Zechariah the priest, the father of John the Baptist.

Zechariah in Hebrew means, “the Lord remembers.” God remembers Zechariah in his old age and gives him a son. This is the last sign before the coming of Christ and concludes God’s revelation in the Old Testament. The angel’s announcement to Zechariah ends in silence, when Zechariah is struck mute. Zechariah’s problem in believing the angel’s message parallels our own struggles. When we fail to trust and truly listen to what God tells us through others, our pleas to God will lack power.

Prayer is a dialogue which presupposes trust. Despite Zechariah’s lack of trust, God answers his long-standing prayer for a child. The Lord opens the barren womb of Elizabeth as He had previously done in the history of Israel for Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah. A barren woman given a child by God proves God’s loving care for those who trust Him.

The Annunciation of Gabriel to the Virgin Mary ~ Nazareth is a Galilean hill town, the

hometown of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Here, she conceived the Word of God, and here the Holy Family made their home. Here, Jesus Christ spent the decades of His childhood and adolescence, His so-called “hidden life.” In the synagogue of this town, Jesus read from Isaiah and proclaimed the fulfillment of prophecy.

The Franciscan archeologist Bellarmino Bagatti discovered on a grotto wall in Nazareth an ancient inscription from the second century AD: “*Chaire Maria*” (Hail Mary). This archeological treasure helped to authenticate this holy place as the home of Mary. The modest dwelling was situated at the end of the village, where the poorest people lived. Excavations reveal about 20 dwellings which housed approximately 150 inhabitants of Nazareth at that time. This archeologist’s findings confirms how the ways of God often contradict the expectations of man, as God chose to come into a poor family in a very small and simple town. The nearby church, finished in 1914, and dedicated to Saint Joseph, houses a water cistern in the crypt of the church and an adjunct grotto believed to be the workshop of Saint Joseph. Experts conclude that the early Christian community celebrated the Sacrament of Baptism here.

Nazareth today holds the largest Christian community in Israel. Pilgrims visit the Basilica of the Annunciation and Saint Joseph Church. Nazareth, never mentioned in the Old Testament, symbolizes for the Christian a new direction, reflecting the contrast between the disobedience of Eve and the perfect submission of the Virgin Mary. Pope John Paul II visited the modern basilica in 2000.

May Nazareth serve as a model of what the family should be. May it show us the family’s holy and enduring character and exemplify its basic function in society: a community of love and sharing, beautiful for the problems it poses and the rewards it brings; in sum, [the family is] the perfect setting for rearing children and for this there is no substitute.

Pope Paul VI, homily at Nazareth (January 5, 1964)

The same archangel who was so tough with Zechariah now appears to the Virgin Mary in Nazareth, but with a different tone. Although Gabriel is God’s servant first, He is also Mary’s servant. He addresses Mary with the unique description *kecharitomene*, a “woman perfected in grace.” No one else in all the pages of Scripture receives this kind of a greeting! Saint Jerome translated this as “*gratia plena*,” and the best English translation is the traditional “full of grace” (Douay-Rheims and RSVCE). Such renditions as “so highly favored “ (Jerusalem Bible) or “highly favored daughter” (New American Bible) fail to convey the full depth of meaning.

Nowhere else in the pages of Scripture does an angel (who always speaks infallibly for God) address a human being this way. Angels themselves are full of grace, and Gabriel speaks to Mary as to one like himself. Now, before Christ’s death on the cross there was no way for a human being to become emptied of sin. Therefore, the only way Mary could be full of grace is if, like the angel, she always had been. Gabriel reveals that the Virgin Mary was free from sin and full of grace.

“Full of grace” refers to the doctrine of the Church known as “The Immaculate Conception of Mary.” Pope Pius IX proclaimed on December 8, 1854: “The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin.”

This biblical truth has been upheld since the early Church and reiterated throughout the centuries. Mary reaffirmed this truth when in 1858 she appeared to a simple, uneducated young girl, Saint Bernadette Soubirous, in a grotto at Massabielle near Lourdes and declared, “I am the Immaculate Conception.” Many healings and miracles in Lourdes prove the truth of God’s goodness and underscore Mary’s role in salvation history and her power as an intercessor.

Gabriel’s demeanor and the tenor of his words defer to Mary not as someone beneath him, as in the meeting with Zachariah, or even on the same level. He appears before his own queen, the future Queen of Heaven who will reign forever as Queen of the angels and saints. God too has confidence in Mary’s goodness and respects her freedom. He does not command her to become the mother of the Redeemer, for this would treat her in a way that no woman should ever be treated. Instead, He asks and He invites. Thus, the whole of salvation history hinges on this one woman's “Yes” to God.

On your word depends comfort for the wretched, ransom for the captive, freedom for the condemned, indeed, salvation for all the sons of Adam, the whole of your race. Answer quickly, O Virgin. Reply in haste to the angel, or rather through the angel to the Lord. Answer with a word, receive the Word of God. Speak your own word, conceive the Divine Word. Breathe a passing word, embrace the Eternal Word.

8–9.
Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the Virgin Mother*, 4.

The new era of salvation begins with the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary. Saint Bede compares the first mother of mankind, Eve, with the new mother, Mary. Where Eve once contained in her womb all humanity, which was doomed to sin, now Mary contains in her womb the new Adam, Jesus Christ, who will father a new humanity by His grace.

Charis in Greek refers to “beauty or charm.” Literally, the angel says that Mary is the most beautiful of women. Beauty is more than physical attractiveness. It is interior virtue that has eternal value. This internal beauty occasionally reveals itself to the outside world. The combination of the greeting, “Hail, full of grace,” with the assurance, “The Lord is with you,” shows that God chose Mary in an exclusive way.

Often the Jewish people failed to follow God faithfully. Yet, despite their unfaithfulness, God was faithful. He protected them and fought for them against their enemies. At times the Chosen People felt abandoned, but they clung to the hope that “Emmanuel” (Isaiah 7:14) would one day come to save them from their sins. This promise was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, Son of God and Son of Mary.

The Visitation and Magnificat (Luke 1:39-54) ~ Humility and the desire to serve her elder cousin motivate Mary to journey to the hill country of Judea. The Visitation is a very great mystery, with deep levels of meaning. Visibly, two women meet, but invisibly, there are two additional participants in the drama, the last of the prophets, John, along with the very Messiah Himself. Mary knows of Elizabeth’s pregnancy because of the message of the angel; Elizabeth knows of Mary’s pregnancy because of the Holy Spirit. Both pregnancies are miraculous, like those of Sarah and Hannah in the Old Testament, but here the two mysteries come into each other’s presence. Selflessly, Elizabeth acknowledges Mary’s miracle as greater than her own.

Saint Elizabeth of Hungary wrote that in Mary’s time all Jewish women yearned to meet the mother of the Messiah. Elizabeth experiences the fulfillment of these hopes, and inspired by the Holy Spirit coauthors the Hail Mary. So a biblical Jewish woman helped to write this Catholic prayer, while a future prophet leapt for joy in her womb. John recognized the real presence of Christ even before his mother did. Origen says that the unborn Christ blesses the unborn John. Luke clearly teaches that the unborn are true persons and even capable of religious experience. When a pregnant woman receives Holy Communion, what a blessing for her unborn child!

The Magnificat, Mary’s Prayer of Humility (Luke 1:46-55) ~ Another woman, Hannah, was inspired to sing a song of praise to the Lord for the favor of becoming the mother of the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1–10). Mary speaks in similar words.

<p>My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in the Lord. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in thy salvation. —Hannah in 1 Samuel</p>	<p>My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. —Mary in Luke 1:46–</p>
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As similar as these two songs seem to be in many details, the underlying attitude could not be more different. Hannah exults over her enemies, but Mary expresses the consummate virtue of humility. Mary does not say, “I have done great things for God,” but rather, “He who is mighty has done great things for me” (Luke 1:49). In fact, she was doing a great thing for God and for all of us, but she acknowledges that the “great thing” was only possible because of divine grace.

The Virgin Mary exemplifies the virtue of humility. The word *humilitas* in Latin comes from the root word *humus* (topsoil). *Humus* provides nutrients for plants and helps the ground retain water. Mary did not go out into the world to perform public deeds. She was “down to earth”—truly humble. And in this virtue she surpasses all other saints, apostles, bishops, martyrs, confessors, and Doctors of the church. Humility is the most godlike virtue. “The Lord is great” (Psalm 135:5), but He bends down to care for our smallest needs. Jesus never exalted Himself, but humbled Himself, taking the form of a slave. In her Magnificat, Mary humbly opened a place in her soul for the action of God. *The whole course of civilization changed because one woman was willing to make one Child the center of her life!* The praying church—popes, bishops, priests, monks, nuns, and laity—conclude evening prayer every day of the year by reciting Mary’s Magnificat together. In so doing, we honor Mary’s great witness of humble service which she has transmitted to us.

The Birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:57–66) ~ In the biblical world, the birth of a boy caused great joy. When the birth was announced, musicians broke into song causing rejoicing and congratulations. Eight days after birth, a Jewish boy receives circumcision and the conferral of a name. At this moment, the Jewish male receives the promises and privileges reserved for the Chosen People. The blood spilled in circumcision was called “the blood of the Covenant.” The outward circumcision was to represent an inner circumcision of the heart.

The gift of life is the result of God’s grace. Zechariah and Elizabeth name their child “John” which means “the grace of God.” Life reverses the image of death represented by Zechariah’s impediment of speech. According to Saint Maximus of Turin (380–465 AD), the power of John’s name frees the tongue of Zechariah, which had been bound, so that the old priest might praise God and prophesy John’s role in salvation history. This extraordinary miracle causes the gathered people to fear God. The fear or “reverence” of God will later draw people to John the Baptist, who will call them to repent in preparation for receiving God’s sacramental mysteries.

Pilgrims visit the sanctuaries of the churches of the Visitation and of Saint John the Baptist in the village of Ain Karem, one of the most picturesque of all biblical sites. The sanctuary of the Visitation, mentioned in early written sources, corresponds to the house outside the village where Mary helped her cousin Elizabeth during the final months of her pregnancy. The isolation of the place preserves the atmosphere of silent prayer and meditation which joined the two holy women together. A pool for ritual purification, discovered in the crypt of the church where Mary pronounced her Magnificat, underlines the religious environment described in Luke 1:39–56.

The sanctuary of the church of Saint John the Baptist resembles a fortress which was built by the Crusaders. The crypt of the church encompasses the grotto which was part of Zechariah’s house. No other remnants of the ancient home remain. This grotto, visited by Christians from ancient times, is venerated as the birthplace of John, the precursor of Jesus. The grotto, called “very luminous” by the early Christians, symbolizes the enlightenment of the human heart that responds to God’s call.

The Benedictus (Luke 1:67–79) ~ Elizabeth is the first person to hear two great canticles of praise—her cousin Mary’s Magnificat, and her husband Zechariah’s Benedictus. He is inspired to invoke the mercy of God, which will come when a new kind of day shall dawn, not from the horizon upwards but from the zenith downwards: “When the day shall dawn upon us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:78–79). Because of this mention of the beginning of the Christian era, Zachariah’s song is used to conclude Lauds in the Liturgy of the Hours. It thus stands in the same relation to morning prayer as the Magnificat does to evening prayer.

Zechariah emphasizes in the Benedictus that God is faithful in keeping His promises in the history of salvation. God’s visitation to His people invites each person to restore the relationship, which was broken with the Lord, through the forgiveness proclaimed by Jesus Christ. God forgives our sins and frees us from both corporeal and spiritual enemies. We no longer “sit in darkness and the shadow of death” (Luke 1:79) as those who were awaiting the Messiah did. Now, because of Jesus Christ, we can “serve [God] without fear in holiness and righteousness” (Luke 1:74–75), walking in the way of peace (Luke 1:79).

The first chapter of Luke shows us much about God and how we are to respond to Him. For

instance, the Magnificat expresses the gratitude of the Virgin Mary for God’s design of salvation in her. God’s intervention into human history enables each person to accept the mercy of God and receive the forgiveness proclaimed and brought about by Jesus Christ. Each of us receives an invitation from God to receive His mercy and to come to know Him in a deeper and more personal way. At the beginning of this study, ponder Mary’s “Yes” to God. God is inviting you to go deeper with Him and to draw closer to Him. Will you say “Yes” to God? May God draw you deeper into the great mystery of His divine love for you as you study His Word.



1. What can you learn about Zechariah and Elizabeth in Luke 1:1–10, 18?

2. Explain the prophecy about the son to be born to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Luke 1:11–17

3. Who is the messenger of God appearing in Daniel 9:20–25, Luke 1:11–20, and Luke 1:26–38?

4. Compare the following verses.

Malachi 3:1–3	
Malachi 3:23, NAB (Malachi 4:5, RSVCE)	
Sirach 48:10–12	
Luke 1:17	

5. Describe the role and job of St. John the Baptist. CCC 523

6. Write down at least five things that the angel Gabriel said to Mary. Luke 1:26–36

7. How does the angel respond to Mary’s question in Luke 1:34? Luke 1:35, 37

8. Describe God’s plan from all eternity from CCC 488.

9. Write down Mary’s response in Luke 1:38.

—What enables Mary to respond to the angel in the way she does? CCC 148

10. How was Mary able to accept the role of the mother of the Savior? CCC 490

—Was Mary ever hampered by personal or original sin? CCC 494

11. Discuss Mary’s virginal motherhood in God’s plan. Choose one. CCC 502–507

12. Compare the following verses.

Isaiah 7:14	
Luke 1:27–31	

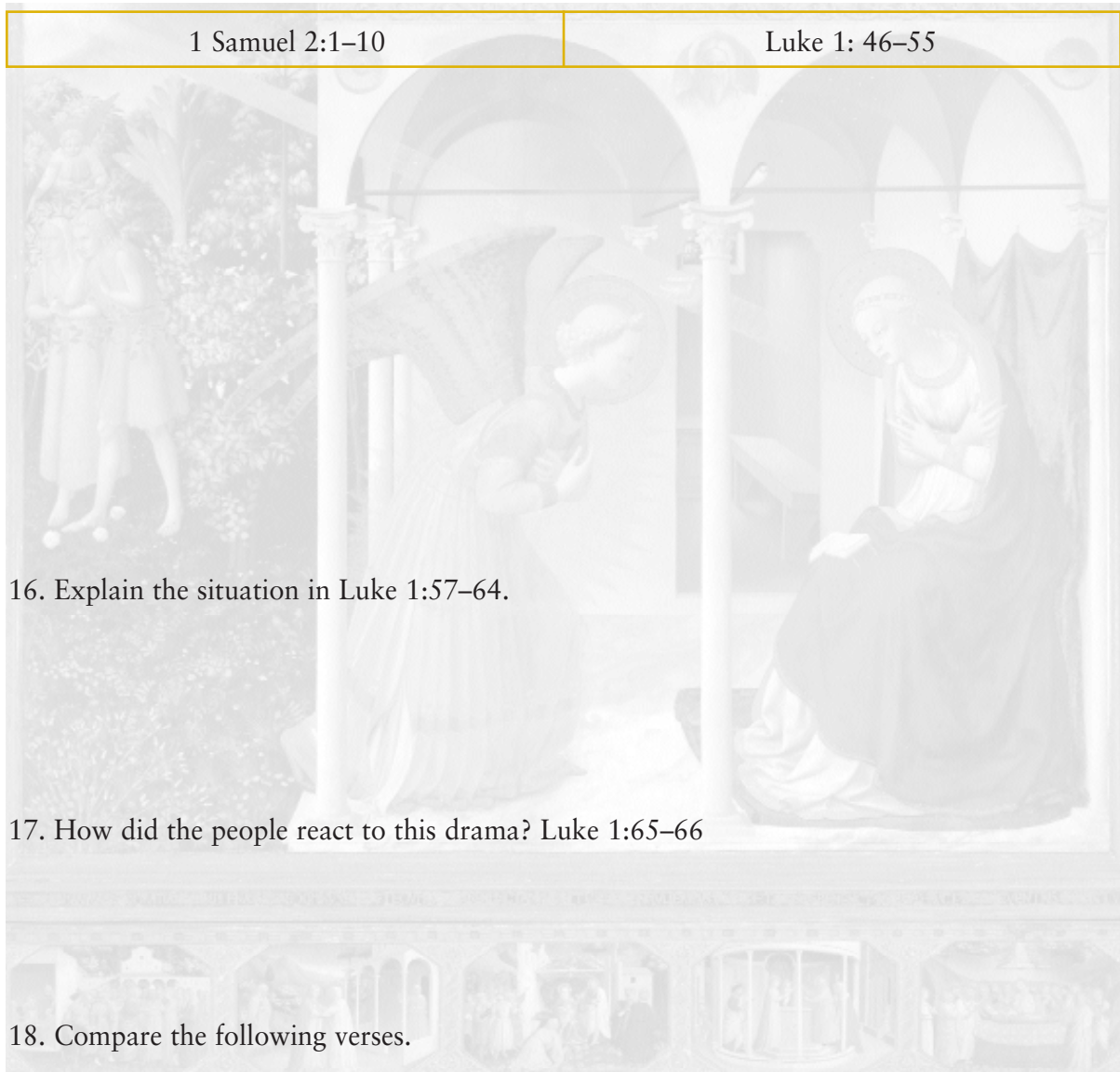
13. What does the name “Jesus” mean in Hebrew? CCC 430

14. Following the visit from the angel Gabriel, what did Mary do? Luke 1:39–40

—What does Mary’s visit to Elizabeth become? CCC 717

—How does Elizabeth greet Mary? Luke 1:42

15. Compare the following passages.



18. Compare the following verses.

Psalm 72:18	Luke 1:68
Psalm 18:3	Luke 1:69
Psalm 106:10	Luke 1:71
Micah 7:20	Luke 1:73
Malachi 3:20	Luke 1:78

19. Describe the promise of Luke 1:79.

20. Have you ever faced an impossible situation? What hope does Luke 1:37 give?

** Write down a prayer request on a sheet of scrap paper and share it with someone in your small group. Commit to praying every day for someone else in your group's need or request.