

The Coming of Jesus



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Luke 1:2, 3; 2 Tim. 3:16; Luke 1:5–22; Deut. 18:15; Luke 2:9–12, 25–32.*

Memory Text: “‘For with God nothing will be impossible’” (*Luke 1:37, NKJV*).

The Gospel of Luke was written primarily to the Gentiles. Luke himself was a Gentile (implied in the context of Colossians 4:10–14), as was Theophilus, to whom the Gospel is addressed.

In addition to being a physician, Luke was a meticulous historian. In introducing the Gospel, Luke places Jesus in real history; that is, he puts the story in the historical context of its times: Herod was the king of Judea (*Luke 1:5*), Augustus reigned over the Roman Empire (*Luke 2:1*), and a priest by the name of Zacharias was exercising his turn in the temple in Jerusalem (*Luke 1:5, 9*). In chapter 3, Luke mentions six contemporary dates related to the ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus.

Thus, Luke places the story of Jesus in history—real people, real times—in order to dismiss any idea of mythology with his narrative. His readers must stand in awe and wonder at the fact that Jesus is real and that through Him God has invaded history with the “‘Savior, who is Christ the Lord’” (*Luke 2:11, NKJV*).

* *Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 4.*

“An Orderly Account”

Acts 1:1 tells us that before Acts was written, its author wrote a “former account.” This, and the fact that both accounts were addressed to Theophilus, helps lead us to conclude that one author was responsible for both books. The two accounts can be viewed as parts 1 and 2 of “Origin and History of the Christian Church.” Part 1 is a narrative of the life and work of Jesus (the Gospel of Luke), and part 2 (Acts of the Apostles) is an account of the spread of the message of Jesus and of the early church.

How was the Gospel written? Read Luke 1:2, 3 and 2 Timothy 3:16.

Luke was aware of many who had written about the events that had shaken the city of Jerusalem and beyond—the events concerning Jesus Christ. The sources for such literary works included many “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” (*Luke 1:2, NKJV*)—a clear reference to the disciples and other contemporaries of Jesus. Luke himself had an exposure to these witnesses and ministers (such as Paul and other apostolic leaders) and possibly also to the Gospels written by Mark and Matthew. Luke, obviously, was not an eyewitness to the Jesus story, but he was a credible and authentic convert to Christ.

Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience, presenting Jesus as the Great Teacher, the fulfillment of prophecy, and the King of the Jews. He often referred to Old Testament prophecies being fulfilled in Christ. Mark wrote to a Roman audience about Jesus, the Person of action. Luke, a doctor and a Gentile, wrote to the Greeks and the Gentiles about the universal Jesus—the Savior of the world. Luke mentions that the purpose of his writing is twofold: to present an “orderly account” (*Luke 1:3, NKJV*) and to provide certainty to the great teachings of the new era. Certainty about truth, as in Jesus, is one goal of his Gospel.

Luke, an inspired author of Scripture, used other material in his writings. Very interesting! Obviously, that use of other sources doesn't negate the inspiration or authority of what he wrote. What lessons should that have for us as Seventh-day Adventists regarding the question of how inspiration, either canonical or noncanonical, works on inspired writers?

“Call His Name John”

For nearly four hundred years after Malachi, divine silence marked the history of Israel. With the birth announcements of John the Baptist and Jesus, the divine silence was about to be broken.

The birth stories of John and Jesus have parallels. Both are miracles: in the case of John, Elizabeth had gone well past the child-bearing age; in the case of Jesus, a virgin was to bear the child. The angel Gabriel announced both birth promises. Both announcements were received in a spirit of wonder, joy, and surrender to God’s will. Both babies were to grow and become strong in the Spirit (*Luke 1:80, 2:40*).

But the mission and the ministry of the two miracle babies were distinct and different. John was to be a preparer of the way for Jesus (*Luke 1:13–17*). Jesus is “‘the Son of God’ ” (*vs. 35*) and the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies (*vss. 31–33*).

Read Luke 1:5–22. Though Zacharias is depicted as “blameless,” his lack of faith at the angel’s announcement brought a rebuke. How does this help us to understand what the concept of “blameless” means for a believer in Jesus?

“The birth of a son to Zacharias, like the birth of the child of Abraham, and that of Mary, was to teach a great spiritual truth, a truth that we are slow to learn and ready to forget. In ourselves we are incapable of doing any good thing; but that which we cannot do will be wrought by the power of God in every submissive and believing soul. It was through faith that the child of promise was given. It is through faith that spiritual life is begotten, and we are enabled to do the works of righteousness.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 98.

The miracle of John had a decisive purpose in God’s dealing with His people. After 400 years of prophetic absence in the history of Israel, John did break forth into that history with a specific message and with a decisive power. John’s mission and message was “‘to make ready a people prepared for the Lord’ ” (*Luke 1:17, NKJV*). He was to be the forerunner of the Messiah, the one to prepare the way for the mission of Jesus.

“Call His Name Jesus”

The birth of Jesus Christ was no normal event. It was marked in God’s eternal calendar, and “when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman” (*Gal. 4:4, NKJV*). It is the fulfillment of the first promise God made after the entrance of sin in Eden (*Gen. 3:15*).

Read the following texts. In each one, how was the birth of Jesus an amazing fulfillment of prophecy? What does this tell us about why we must learn to trust all God’s promises? *Deut. 18:15; Acts 3:22–24; Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:22, 23; Mic. 5:2; Luke 2:4–7.*

Six months after Gabriel announced to Zacharias the coming birth of John, he announced to Mary of Nazareth an even greater miracle: that a virgin will “ ‘conceive . . . and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS’ ” (*Luke 1:31, NKJV*).

The virgin birth of Jesus goes against all nature, and it cannot be explained by nature or naturalistic philosophy. Even Mary had her question: “ ‘How can this be, since I do not know a man?’ ” (*vs. 34, NKJV*). The angel assured her that this would be the work of the Holy Spirit (*vs. 35*), and “ ‘with God nothing will be impossible’ ” (*vs. 37, NKJV*). Mary’s immediate and faithful submission was remarkable: “ ‘Let it be to me according to your word’ ” (*vs. 38, NKJV*). Every human question, no matter how natural or logical, must give way to the divine answer. Be it Creation or the Cross, the Incarnation or the Resurrection, the downpour of manna or the outpouring of Pentecost—the divine initiative demands human surrender and acceptance.

While Mary answered her own question by submission and surrender to God’s sovereignty and eternal purpose, Gabriel assured her with another great answer: “ ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God’ ” (*vs. 35, NKJV*).

Some secular cultures have been browbeaten into believing that everything, ultimately, has a naturalistic and scientific explanation. Why is this such a narrow, even superficial, view of the grandeur and greatness of reality?

The Manger of Bethlehem

Luke begins the story of the Bethlehem manger with a note of history. Joseph and Mary left their home in Nazareth to travel to their ancestral town of Bethlehem as a result of a census decree of Caesar Augustus, the emperor of Rome, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Such historical details must lead Bible students to appreciate Luke's submission to the Holy Spirit, so that he would record the details of the Incarnation within the framework of history.

Reflect on the poverty of Jesus as seen in Luke 2:7. Compare the image of “swaddling clothes,” the “manger,” and “no room . . . in the inn,” with Paul’s description of the condescension of Jesus in Philippians 2:5–8. What kind of a road did Jesus walk on our behalf?

The story of the poor circumstances in which the Lord of heaven incarnated Himself continues with the first visitors the manger had: the shepherds. Not to the rich or the powerful, not to the scribes or the priests, not to rulers and the powers that held sway over the land did the “‘good tidings of great joy’ ” (*Luke 2:10, NKJV*) come, but to humble and despised shepherds. Observe the majesty and the simplicity of the message: *A Savior is born to you. In the city of David. He is Christ the Lord, the Anointed One. You will find Him wrapped in swaddling clothes* (author’s translation). Heaven’s most precious gift came in such a simple package, as often it does. But the gift brings “‘glory to God,’ ” “‘on earth peace,’ ” and “‘goodwill toward men’ ” (*vs. 14, NKJV*).

Luke’s record of the angel (*Luke 2:9–12*) brings out three vital matters of Christian theology. First, the good news of the gospel is for “‘all people.’ ” In Jesus both the Jew and the Gentile become one people of God. Second, Jesus is the Savior; there is no one else. Third, Jesus is Christ the Lord. These three themes, so clearly established early in Luke, later became the foundation of the apostolic preaching, particularly that of Paul.

Think about what we believe as Christians: the Creator of all that was made (*John 1:1–3*) not only entered into this fallen world as a human being but lived the hard life that He did, only to wind up on a cross. If we *really* believe that, why should every aspect of our life be lived in submission to this amazing truth? What parts of your life reflect your belief in the story of Jesus, and what parts don’t?

The Witnesses to the Savior

Although writing primarily to the Gentiles, Luke was aware of the importance of the Jewish heritage through the Old Testament. He takes care to link the New Testament story with the Old and provides the scene of Mary and Joseph having the Baby Jesus circumcised on the eighth day and taking Him to the temple in Jerusalem, all according to Jewish law (*Luke 2:22–24*).

Read *Luke 2:25–32*. Note three points about the theology of salvation that Simeon brings to the fore: salvation is through Jesus; salvation is prepared by God; salvation is for all peoples—to the Gentiles as well as to Israel. How do these truths tie in with the first angel’s message of *Revelation 14:6, 7*?

Simeon’s prophecy also predicted two significant features of Jesus’ ministry.

First, Christ is “ ‘destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel’ ” (*Luke 2:34, NKJV*). Yes, Christ has brought light and salvation to all, but not without cost to the recipient. With Christ there is no neutral ground: accept Him or reject Him, and upon the appropriate response one’s salvation depends. Christ demands exclusiveness; we abide in Him or we do not. Those who abide in Him will rise up and be part of His kingdom; those who reject Him or remain indifferent to Him will fall to the ground and perish without hope. Faith in Christ is nonnegotiable.

Second, Simeon prophesies to Mary, “ ‘a sword will pierce through your own soul also’ ” (*Luke 2:35, NKJV*). The reference no doubt is to the Cross, which Mary will witness. Mary and all the generations that follow her ought to remember that without the Cross, there is no salvation. The Cross is the hub around which the entire plan of salvation revolves.

Salvation is a gift in that we can do nothing to earn it. Yet, it can still be very costly to those who claim it for themselves. What has following Christ cost you, and why is that cost, whatever it may be, cheap enough?

Further Study: “Luke, the writer of the Gospel that bears his name, was a medical missionary. In the Scriptures he is called ‘the beloved physician.’ Colossians 4:14. The apostle Paul heard of his skill as a physician, and sought him out as one to whom the Lord had entrusted a special work. He secured his co-operation, and for some time Luke accompanied him in his travels from place to place. After a time, Paul left Luke at Philippi, in Macedonia. Here he continued to labor for several years, both as a physician and as a teacher of the gospel. In his work as a physician he ministered to the sick, and then prayed for the healing power of God to rest upon the afflicted ones. Thus the way was opened for the gospel message. Luke’s success as a physician gained for him many opportunities for preaching Christ among the heathen. It is the divine plan that we shall work as the disciples worked.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 140, 141.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 If Luke, in writing his Gospel, took into account previously published materials, how are we to understand the inspiration of the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16)? How does inspiration work? See Ellen G. White, “The Inspiration of the Prophetic Writers,” *Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 15–23.
- 2 The virgin birth is of God’s making, marked by His mystery, majesty, and mission. It is truly beyond human understanding too. But the question is, So what? How many secular things are beyond human understanding as well? If God does exist, and He has the power to create and sustain the universe, why should something like the virgin birth be beyond His power? Only those whose worldview is limited to natural laws alone (at least the ones we now currently understand) could, a priori, dismiss the idea of a virgin birth. In contrast, those whose worldview incorporates the supernatural should have, a priori, no reason to reject it. After all, look at what the angel said to Mary after giving her the incredible news: “For with God nothing shall be impossible” (Luke 1:37).
- 3 An American TV interviewer is reported to have said that if he had an opportunity, the person he would most like to interview would be Jesus, and he would ask Him just one question: “Are You indeed born of a virgin?” Why is that question, and the answer to it, so important?

A Divine Encounter

TANG YUE, CHINA

Taking her six-year-old son by the hand, Tang Yue didn't expect anything unusual to happen as she walked from her home to the nearby market. Little did she know that she was about to experience a divine encounter.

Tang Yue believed in God, and on Sundays she met together with other Christian believers. But at the moment, her thoughts were centered on what she needed to get at the market. As she walked down the street, two kind-looking men approached her and stopped.

"You know," said one, "keeping Sunday is not from the Bible." He held up a Bible and showed the astonished Tang Yue texts regarding the seventh-day Sabbath. Encouraging her to see for herself, the other man told her, "You can search the Internet, and see what day is really the Sabbath day."

Then the men concluded their brief presentation by telling Tang Yue, "Jesus came to this world, and the 'Saturday church' is really the church of God." Then as quickly as they had come, the two men disappeared into the crowd.

Astonished by this strange, brief meeting, Tang Yue went home and began searching the Internet for answers to the questions the strangers had raised. To her surprise, she came across an amazing Web site in Chinese that had answers to her questions, including clear answers about the seventh day, Saturday, being God's true Sabbath. The Web site also offered easy-to-follow Bible studies. Learning that the Web site was from a Seventh-day Adventist ministry, she wondered if there might be an Adventist church nearby that she could visit.

During another Internet search, Tang Yue was happy to learn that there was an Adventist church in her city, and she decided to visit. *Surely there must be something special about this church*, she thought to herself.

Finding her way to the church the following Sabbath, Tang Yue looked for the two men who had approached her on the street, but she didn't see them. In fact, she never saw them again.

But she keeps returning to the Adventist church and believes that she has found her spiritual home. "[This church] is teaching very closely to the Bible," says Tang Yue. "It is very different from the Sunday church. I believe that what the Adventists are teaching is the truth and that Jesus is coming soon."

Tang Yue continues to worship regularly with Seventh-day Adventists who meet together in an apartment within a city in central China.

This quarter, a part of your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering is going to help provide more places of worship for believers in China.

Gina Wahlen, editor of the mission quarterlies, wrote the Inside Stories, unless otherwise indicated.

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Luke 1:37*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Comprehend that Jesus is real, historical, and universal.

Feel: Embrace the promise that all things are possible with God.

Do: Experience salvation by living close to Jesus.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Reality of Jesus

A How does the virgin birth of Jesus reveal that salvation is God’s activity, not humanity’s?

B How do we learn from Luke 1 and 2 that Jesus is a real historical person—and not a myth?

C How is the universality of Christ and His gospel emphasized by Luke?

II. Feel: All Things Are Possible With God.

A How do the births of John the Baptist and Jesus provide us with confidence that all things are possible with God?

B If you are poor or helpless, what can you learn from Gabriel’s assurance, “‘With God nothing will be impossible’ ” (*Luke 1:37, NKJV*)?

III. Do: Experience God’s Promise

A How can the prayer lives of Mary, Elizabeth, and Zacharias help you to trust and experience God’s promises?

B Reflect on the manger, the swaddling clothes, and “no room in the inn.” Why should we not allow poverty to prevent us from being used by God in His mission?

▶ **Summary:** The promise “with God nothing is impossible” should enable us to wait upon God, to listen to His Word, and to pray for the fulfillment of His purposes in our lives.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Luke 1:31–35*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Discerning Christians often see history as the story of God—God’s action in human history. The biblical record begins with the mighty act of God’s Creation and traces the tragic failure of human beings because of sin. The conflict between Christ and Satan, between righteousness and sin, marks much of history. With the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the Second Person of the Godhead stepped into space and time to fulfill the covenant promise of Genesis 3:15, to accomplish God’s redemptive plan (*1 Tim. 3:16*), and to assure the end of sin and Satan and the ultimate triumph of divine justice and mercy in the great controversy (*Rev. 20:10*).

Just for Teachers: This week’s lesson launches the study of Luke, the longest of the four Gospels. Not an eyewitness to the story of Jesus, Luke takes on the task of producing an “orderly account” as to who Jesus was and what He did. A physician by profession (*Col. 4:14*), a travel companion of Paul (*2 Tim. 4:11, Philem. 24*), a Greek scholar with interest in historical research (*Luke 1:3, 2:1*), Luke conveys in his writing empathy, scholarship, research, and, above all, a universal Savior to the Gentiles, as well as to the Jews (*Luke 3:6, 9:51–56, 10:25–37, 17:11–19*). Make that concept of universality the focus of your lesson today.

Opening Discussion: Luke’s Gospel begins with two miracles: the birth of John to a couple past the age of childbearing (*Luke 1:11–18*) and the birth of Jesus to a virgin (*vss. 26–34*). What other miracles in Scripture can you think of through which God has revealed His will? Why is the virgin birth fundamental to God’s redemptive mission?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Luke is the only New Testament writer who is not a Jew. As a Gentile, he is writing to a fellow Gentile, his friend Theophilus. A man of culture, a Greek scholar (the first four verses of this Gospel are said to be the best Greek in the New Testament), a doctor, and a historian with a universal worldview, Luke presents the Savior of the world, irrespective of race or nationality, rank, gender, or age.

Of the four Gospels, Luke gives us a more complete narrative: about 30 percent of the information it provides is not found in the other

Gospels. Without Luke we would not have inherited such universally loved stories as the good Samaritan, the prodigal son, the rich man and Lazarus, the rich fool, the Pharisee and the tax collector, and so on. As you lead out in the study this quarter, keep in mind the unique features of Luke’s theological certainty and clarity about Jesus.

Bible Commentary

Luke’s Gospel begins with a statement of purpose: to provide an “orderly account” of the extraordinary life of Jesus. The account is twofold: first, historical—that Jesus is real and came at a specific time in history (note the historical persons and periods mentioned in Luke 1:5, 2:1–5) and that He was not a myth; second, redemptive—that Jesus was sent by God to be and to bring the good news of salvation to humanity (*Luke 1:31–35, 2:11*). The orderly account is obvious in the first two chapters of Luke: it details the preparations for the coming of Jesus and His birth and testifies to His uniqueness.

I. Preparing the Way (*Review Luke 1:5–25 with your class.*)

The Old Testament prepares for the New. From the first promise of Genesis 3:15 to the last prediction of “the Sun of Righteousness” (*Mal. 4:2*), the entire prophetic Word has one singular purpose: to prepare the way for the Redeemer. Malachi closes his prophetic narrative with a prediction that God would send Elijah the prophet to prepare the way for the Messiah. Four hundred years after that prophecy, Gabriel tells Zacharias, an elderly, childless priest, that he and his barren wife will have a son who will come “in the spirit and power of Elijah . . . ‘to make ready a people prepared for the Lord’ ” (*Luke 1:17, NKJV*).

Whoever prepares the way and witnesses for Jesus, both then and now, must have a life that

- is “ ‘great in the sight of the Lord’ ” (*vs. 15, NKJV*),
- is “ ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ ” (*vs. 15, NKJV*),
- “ ‘will turn many . . . to the Lord their God’ ” (*vs. 16, NKJV*),
- will minister with “ ‘the spirit and power of Elijah’ ” (*vs. 17, NKJV*),
- and will “ ‘make ready a people . . . for the Lord’ ” (*vs. 17, NKJV*).

Consider This: Compare Gabriel’s description of John’s character (*Luke 1:15–17*) with Zacharias’s prophecy concerning John’s mission (*vss. 67–79*).

II. The Birth of Jesus (*Review Luke 1:26–38, 2:1–20 with your class.*)

Nothing in the divine scheme of things happens by accident. At the command of God the Father, Gabriel, the chief of the angelic hosts, speeds from the throne room of heaven to the little village of Nazareth to tell a young virgin that she will “ ‘conceive . . . and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS,’ ” who “ ‘will be called the Son of the Highest’ ” (*Luke 1:31, 32, NKJV*).

Luke leaves us with no doubts about the virgin birth. To those who cavil against the miracle and insist on a nonsupernatural birth, Gabriel gives a profound answer: “ ‘With God nothing will be impossible’ ” (*vs. 37, NKJV*). If God is limited in how He undertakes His purposes, then God ceases to be God. How God accomplishes His holy purpose, we must accept in faith. The Son of Mary is the Son of God—humanity and divinity, blending ever so miraculously, existing ever so mysteriously in Jesus, the “ ‘Savior, who is Christ the Lord’ ” (*Luke 2:11, NKJV*).

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Jesus of history and Christ of faith are inseparable in the New Testament witness of Jesus Christ. What are the risks of trying to choose one and ignore the other?
- ❷ Thomas Aquinas is quoted as saying, “In order that the body of Christ might be shown to be a real body, he was born of a woman; but in order that his Godhead might be made clear he was born of a virgin.” What do you think of such a statement, and why?

III. Witnesses to the Uniqueness of Jesus (*Review Luke 2:1–35 with your class.*)

History itself bears witness that Jesus is not a fictional figure created by some first-century publicity seekers anxious to break off from exclusivist Judaism and the mystery cults of Rome and Greece. Luke sets forth the historical reality of Jesus by asserting that He was born in real time when Augustus ruled over the empire and Quirinius was governing Syria and when Caesar issued his census order that sent Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem (*Luke 2:1–7*). Luke, the historian, has no room for a mythical Jesus. To him Jesus is real. He is the Son of Mary, He is the Son of God, and He is the Savior of the world.

That picture of the universal Jesus emerges throughout Luke, as we will see in the lessons that follow. The good news of salvation is for all humankind, and it promises the essentials of life: “ ‘glory to God . . . on earth peace, goodwill toward men!’ ” (*vs. 14, NKJV*).

Two thousand years later, that formula for life’s eternal reward still remains the same. Peace is ever the human hope, but it cannot be our first

priority. That should ever be “glory to God.” Where God is acknowledged and received, peace within and peace without will follow. The shepherds experienced it; Jerusalem missed it. And that is the tragedy of so much that is human.

Consider This: Why must giving God the glory in our lives be our first priority over and above the pursuit of peace or any other earthly happiness?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: God’s actions in redemptive history are well predicted in biblical prophecy, and yet few of even those who are familiar with such prophecies are ready when the fulfillment of such events takes place. The apostle Paul says, “When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son” (*Gal. 4:4, NKJV*). Ellen G. White says, “Like the stars in the vast circuit of their appointed path, God’s purposes know no haste and no delay. . . . When the great clock of time pointed to that hour, Jesus was born in Bethlehem.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 32. Discuss with the class the purpose of prophecy and the tragedy of human neglect of God’s Word.

Thought Question: When Jesus was born in Bethlehem and later began His ministry, only a few were ready to accept Him for who He was. Why is this so?

Application Question: Just as prophecy predicted the first coming of Jesus, it also proclaims His second coming. How will our preparedness for His second coming be any different from that of the generation that witnessed His first coming?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Today’s lesson opens the possibility for self-examination. Ask for volunteers to answer a simple question: **If I were:**

1. Theophilus, what would convince me to believe in Luke’s history?
2. Gabriel, why did God choose me to bear the news that would bring the destruction of one whose place I took in heaven?
3. Elizabeth, why would I believe in my husband’s story of Gabriel visiting him in the temple?
4. Mary, how could I face the scandalous looks and the unbearable stories that would go around in Nazareth?