**TWO OLD PERSONS' LIFE OF FAITH**

**Luke 1:1-25**

**Key Verse: 1:6**

**"Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regula­tions blame­lessly."**

**Study Questions**

1. What was Luke's motivation in compiling the gospel ac­count? (1-4) Why were the birth, life and death of Jesus such epochal events in hu­man and bibli­cal history? (1-4)

2. In what respects was Zechariah's life of faith like a lamp burning in dark times? What shows the darkness of the times? Why were these two old people called upright? (5,6)

3. Describe Zechariah's encounter with the angel Gabriel. What does this event reveal about Zechariah's prayer life? (8-13)

4. Why was John called great before God? (14-17)

5. Why was Zechariah rebuked by the angel Gabriel? How did God train him and what was the purpose of the training? What was Eliza­beth's confession of faith? What does this show about her faith?

**The birth of John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah had been prophesied long ago (Is 40:3). At last, the prophecy was about to be fulfilled by the announcement con­cern­ing the birth of John the Bap­tist. In this passage, there is another story about two senior citi­zens who pre­pared the spi­­ritual envi­ron­ment for the birth of John. They were Zecha­riah and Elizabeth. To­day we learn about John's par­ents, Zecha­riah and Eliza­beth, and a little about John.**

**First, St. Luke's motivation in compiling the gospel account (1-4).**

**In the world, there are many autobiog­raphies and biographies writ­ten by many in the hope that their achievements or their good deeds might be remembered by their de­scen­dants. But their lives and works impress us as sad and fatal­istic in­stead of mak­ing us happy. In fact, they tried hard to survive and died sor­rowful­ly.**

**But Jesus' story about his life and work marks a new era of hu­man histo­ry. For example, BC changed into AD, Anno Domini--"in the year of our Lord." This indi­cates a historical land­mark. In terms of bibli­ology, Je­sus' life and work divide the Old Testa­ment era and the New Testament era. What is astonishing, many have undertaken to draw up an account of Je­sus' life and work. Their numbers, throughout the generations, are un­countable. But only four of them completed writing the story about Jesus' life and work. They are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. There is a story about a despotic king. The king want­ed to rule his nation based on Chi­nese positivism. In order to maintain his policy, he killed 8,000 Christians. Once, after he became old, he said to his wife, "I want to grant one request to you, whatever it may be." Then the queen, who had been very faithful to the king, said very qui­etly, "I request your permission to receive baptism. I want to re­ceive eternal salvation from sin and eternal life and the kingdom of God" (Jn 5:24). Then the king said, crying, "Your request is granted." Christian faith spread mainly to the servant-class as well as to the slave-class people. They heard Jesus' word that all men are equal in God. One slave asked a Christian evangelist, "If all human beings are equal, then are we slaves equal with the king?" "Yes, you are," the evangelist an­swered. Then the slave was happy to die for the sake of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus.**

**At that time, there was no written Bible book. Some people had Old Testament scrolls. But mostly, Jesus' story about his life and work and his words were handed down by word of mouth, mainly by his disci­ples, who were the eyewitnesses of God's work and the servants of God's word. Luke, the historian and evangelist, realized that this life-­giving word of God must be spread to the whole world. So he as­sumed the task of compiling the story about Jesus' life and work, and Jesus' words. In doing so, he carefully investigated every­thing from the beginning and dedicated his gospel to Theophilus. The word "Theophilus" has the impression of an emperor or a king. But it is not. "Theo­phi­lus" means those who love God.**

**Second, Zechariah's life of faith (5-7).**

**The period from 40 BC to 4 BC was a time when King Herod ruled Judea (5), and it was a time of tragedy for the people of Israel. Herod was a pup­pet of the Roman Em­pire and an in­strument of Satan. This Herod stran­gled his two sons, suspecting that they would be his possible political oppo­nents. What was worse, when he heard that the King of the Jews had been born, he became fearful, not knowing that he was a spiritual king. So in an attempt to kill the baby Jesus, he ordered all the boys in Bethle­hem and its vicinity who were two years old and under to be killed (Mt 2:16). "In the time of Herod," thus points to a period of tragedy in the history of Israel (16). The lamp of God seemed to have been extin­guish­ed. But it was not. There were still many de­vout people who were waiting for the coming of the Messiah. Among them, Zechariah and Eliza­beth were a good example. Luke says they were upright be­fore God. Why were they upright? Look at verse 6. "Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's command­ments and regula­tions blamelessly." In other words, they studied the Bible diligently. Hu­man­ly speak­ing, Zechari­ah and Elizabeth were very fatal­istic people be­cause they had no child in their old age (7). But they were not victim­ized by fatalism because they believed in God through regu­lar Bible study. Second, they were upright before God be­cause, not only did they study the Bible, but also they lived up to the teach­ings of the Bible. One medical doctor was the only one who completed all the Bible study material assigned to the Chicago UBF leaders. The doctor was happy. The other day fellowship leaders were invited to a Christ­mas dinner. The doctor said, "I really want to bring my wife to the din­ner." So his wife was invited to the dinner.**

**What then is the key point of the law of God? It is to love God whole­heart­edly and to love our neighbor as ourself (Mk 12:30-31). Zecha­riah and Eliza­beth loved God and they loved their neighbors in that dark generation. The towns­peo­ple may have said, "They have no fun, not even a goat." But they really liked Zechariah and Elizabeth as their parents. Zech­ariah and Elizabeth were happy all the time be­cause they had God in their hearts. The townspeople were happy whenever they saw Zechariah and Eliz­a­beth. Com­pared with the great military power of the Roman Em­pire, these two old persons' life of faith seemed to be unim­portant. But to God, these two old per­sons' life of faith was more pow­erful than the military pow­­er of Rome. And they were the lamp of God, and the whole church of God.**

**Third, Zechariah's life of prayer (8-13).**

**In the ancient Jewish world, many thousands of priests wanted to have the privilege of burning in­cense in the tem­ple, and most of them died without enjoying the privi­lege. But Zechariah was chosen by fortune to carry out the priestly duty in the temple (8,9). It was a great day in his life. Insomuch as he was thrilled with the privilege, he was obliged to pray for his people, call­ing their names one by one. When Zechari­ah was alone in the tem­ple burning incense, an angel of the Lord ap­pear­ed (11). When Zechari­ah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear (12), for the Hebrew people thought that they would die if they saw God with their own eyes. This might be one reason why he was afraid. Still, there was another reason. Look at verse 13. "But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Eliza­beth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.'" While he should have been pray­ing for his people and his nation as his priestly duty, Zech­ariah did not pray for the people, but he prayed for himself, saying, "O Lord, give me a son!" Zechariah did not mean to pray for himself. But his habit of praying for a son to be given him was habitu­ally repeated. Thus he revealed the basic selfishness of human­kind. And Zechariah's performance of priestly duty was not excellent. How­ever, we cannot deny the fact that Zechariah prayed. We are greatly inspired by Zechariah to have a hope of raising 10,000 young American Bible teachers through selfish people's prayer.**

**Maybe Zechariah began to pray for a son after 10 months of mar­ried life. Then he pray­ed for a son for three years, but when he looked at his wife's stomach, he saw no sign. He prayed another three years and looked at her. Still, he saw no sign. In this way, he must have pray­ed for a son all his lifetime. Prayer is a measure of faith. Even though he lived in an unbe­lieving generation, he was a man of prayer. It is interesting to know that Zechariah had one prayer topic all his lifetime. By nature, hu­man be­ings are forgetful. If people were not for­get­ful, they would die because of all the un­happy memo­ries of the past. In his wisdom, God made men for­getful. So we don't have to wor­ry that we are forgetful. But Zechariah never forgot his one prayer topic all his lifetime, for a son to be given him. God used this man of prayer as the father of John the Baptist. This part reminds us of Mark 11:24. It says, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."**

**It is important to know that God uses praying people. To the eyes of worldly peo­ple, Zecha­ri­ah in the temple burning incense and the crowd of people praying out­side looked like a handful of mountain goats. But in God's sight, these praying people were main mem­bers in God's history, and God was rul­ing the world through them.**

**Fourth, John is great before God because God chose him (14-17).**

**Verse 14 says that John's birth would bring great joy to his mother and to his fa­ther and to all the neighbors. Why? It was be­cause he was born in the provi­dence of God. The angel said to Zecha­riah, "You are to give him the name John." The name John means, "gra­cious gift of God." God chose John as the forerunner of Jesus. So John was great because he was chosen by God to do the work of God. Some people act as if they are doing God a favor when they do something for God. We must know that we did not choose God. God chose us. John 15:16 says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and ap­pointed you to go and bear fruit...." John is great be­cause he was chosen as the forerun­ner of the Messiah.**

**John is great before God because he lived a pure life. Look at verse 15b. "He is never to take wine or other fer­mented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth." John lived a pure life before God against the corrupt worldly way of life. In order to live a pure life, he did not take wine or other fermented drink. In most cases, drink­ing was the start­ing point of all the evil-doings. When John lived a pure life before God, people said, "He is de­mon-pos­sess­ed. He is not corrupt like one of us" (Mt 11:18). He slept in crevices of rocks. He ate locusts and wild honey. When he lived a pure life, God gave mighty powerful spirit to him. At that time, the world was im­mor­al and violent. As we know well, cor­ruption makes a man utterly pow­erless to do anything. But when John lived a pure life, God gave him spirit and power in his inner man.**

**John is great before God because he had God's holy mission. John was sent to prepare the way for the coming Messi­ah. His mission was to preach the message of repentance to all kinds of people (16,17). In time past and present, people are proud because of their sins. So they hate most to hear the word, "repent." John was appointed to carry out the mis­sion of preaching the message of repen­tance. For this, John rebuked peo­ple's corruption and perversion. John re­buked many run­away fathers to repent and come back to their chil­dren. He rebuked disobedi­ent chil­dren to repent and live in the wis­dom of God. His life of mission ended with impris­onment and martyr­dom. But the Bible history says that he was not a victim of the vicious cycles of the world, but that he was a great man in the sight of God.**

**John is great before God because he is a man of spir­it. What was his source of power as a man of God? John was like a reincarna­tion of the proph­et Elijah (17). He came in an epoch similar to that in which Elijah had lived. In the time of Elijah the prophet, King Ahab and Queen Jeze­bel ruled Israel. No one dared to rebuke King Ahab and Queen Jeze­bel's wicked­ness. But Eli­jah, a man of God's Spir­it, re­buked them to repent their wick­edness. Likewise, John, a man with God's Spirit, rebuked Herod the tetrarch to re­pent of his sin of adul­tery (Mk 6:18), even though Herod the tetrarch was a most cruel man who could kill anybody, anytime. John's pow­er to rebuke came from the Spirit of God (17). A nation's power does not depend on the size of its highways. It depends on the spiritual condi­tion of its people.**

**Fifth, God trains Zechariah (18-25).**

**The angel's message to Zechariah was God's promise to give him a son. In his embarrass­ment, Zech­ariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years" (18). He was a man of pray­er. He had faith in God's sovereign rule in history. But when his prayer was answered, he was too happy to believe it. Momentari­ly, he fell into human think­ing, forgetting that nothing is impossible with God.**

**So the angel Gabriel rebuked him: "I am Gabriel. I stand in the pres­ence of God...And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words..." (19,20). Though Zech­a­riah had received enough training through his childless situation, he need­ed more training in order to have faith in God's words. For this, God gave him dumb training--training not to speak unbe­lieving words for nine months. When Zechari­ah came out to the people, suddenly he became a pan­to­mime artist; he tried to speak with sign language. The multitude wait­ing outside did not know what had happened inside the temple. So the peo­ple assumed that he had seen a vision. The interpretation was better than the dream. Anyway, God was training John's father in preparation for the birth of John.**

**After this, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months re­mained in seclusion. Through five months of seclu­sion, she came to the conclusion that God is almighty, and said, "The Lord has done this for me" (25). We also must experience God's mighty work in us until we can con­fess, "The Lord has done this for me."**

**Zechariah and Elizabeth were upright in the sight of God. In other words, these two old persons studied the Bible diligently in that dark gen­eration and loved God wholeheartedly. They also loved their neigh­bor as them­selves. May God help us to study the Bible diligently and love God and our neighbors wholeheartedly.**