

**Sermons**  
**Preparing for the Lord (Part 2)**

**Luke 1:5-25**

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*Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher*  
*Countryside Bible Church, Southlake, Texas*

This week I read a Jewish rabbi's response to Jesus' claims to be the Messiah. This is what Rabbi Simmons, who was ordained in Jerusalem and now lives in Israel wrote: "Saying that God assumes human form makes God small, diminishing both His unity and His divinity. Judaism says that the Messiah will be born of human parents and possess normal physical attributes like other people. He will not be a demigod and will not possess supernatural qualities. In fact, an individual is alive in every generation with the capacity to step into the role of the Messiah."

When you survey the evidence of the first century, it's clear that the Jews and all God-fearing people had for millennia anticipated the coming of Messiah, whatever their misconceptions may have been, like that of Rabbi Simmons. But they anticipated the coming of Messiah.

So, because of that, the gospels begin their accounts of the life of Christ with this incredible announcement: Jesus of Nazareth is, in fact, Israel's long-awaited Messiah. Let me show you just how clear this is Matthew 1:1. Matthew begins his account of Jesus' life, "The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham..." Mark does exactly the same thing in his gospel. Mark 1:1: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Let me remind you that when you see the words "Jesus Christ" together, it's not as if Jesus is His first name and Christ is His second name. Jesus is His name. Christ is a title. It's the Greek word *Christos*, from which... or which comes from the Old Testament Hebrew word *Hamaschiach*, the Messiah. It means the anointed one.

So, when Mark writes this, he is saying the beginning of the gospel of Jesus, who is the Messiah, the Son of God. Luke does the same thing in his gospel. He puts the words in the mouth of the angel in Luke 2, as he begins the story of Christ. In Luke 2, on the night of His birth, verse 11, the angel says to the shepherds, "for today in the city of David there has been born for you a

Savior, who is Christ [Messiah] the Lord.” The apostle John, after beginning his gospel reminding his readers that the Word was with God, the Word was God, he comes to the heart of who this person is in verse 17: “for the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ [the Messiah]. No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained [literally exegeted] Him.” No question that when the gospel writers recorded their account of the life of Christ, they all with one voice say He is in fact the long-awaited Messiah.

Now, if you were Jewish or a God-fearing Gentile, living in that time, reading these gospels, familiar with the Hebrew Old Testament or with the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament), your first question when someone says, “There’s the Messiah!” would be this: “Where is the messenger?” Because the last prophet of Israel had promised that before Messiah came, a messenger would come first and prepare the way. In Malachi 3:1 (we looked at last time): “Behold, I am sending My messenger, and he will clear a way before Me. And the Lord, whom you are seeking, will suddenly come to His temple...” That’s why even though all four of the gospel writers don’t include the birth of Christ... You ever thought about this? Not all the gospel writers include the birth of Christ; John doesn’t. But they all include John the Baptist. Why? Because of the prophecy. The messenger would come.

So, this section, that we’re looking at together in Luke 1 about John and his birth, is not extraneous detail. It goes to the heart of Jesus’ credentials as Messiah. The good news begins with the coming of the messenger, the forerunner. And that’s why Luke weaves in and out of the main storyline of the birth of Christ, the remarkable story of this man we call John - John the Baptist.

He is an absolutely essential character because he serves, as we learned last time, as a hinge between the testaments. He is the point of continuity. He is the last Old Testament prophet. What do I mean by that? Even though his life and ministry are recorded in the New Testament, he really belongs to the Old Testament era because he, like all of the other Old Testament prophets, was merely preparing the people of God for the coming of the Messiah. And with Jesus’ ministry, that new era actually begins. The Old Testament ends with the amazing promise

that the Lord Himself will enter time and space. But first, will come His messenger, a unique prophet. And he will announce Messiah's coming, He will prepare the way before him. That's John. John is that point of continuity between the testaments, and he serves as a special witness to the true Messiah. That's why he is so vitally connected to the Christmas story. He is the promised one. He is the one designated to announce Messiah. And because of that the Christmas story, as Luke presents it, really begins with the announcement of John's birth. And that's why we're studying it together, Luke 1:5-25.

Now, as we walk our way through this story, as I told you last time, it unfolds in several remarkable movements. And I just want to review with you, briefly, to bring you back into the context of the story. Let's look at **the** movements we've examined already together.

First of all, the first movement is the historical context, given to us at the beginning of verse 5: "In the days of Herod, king of Judea..." This happened in the land of the Jews. God planted His people on that little piece of land because it was the land bridge that connected the three great continents of the ancient world - Europe, Asia, and Africa. If you wanted to travel from one of those continents to another, you didn't travel the Mediterranean primarily because of the dangers at sea. You didn't certainly travel through the desert to the east. You traveled through that tiny land bridge known as Israel. On that tiny strategic strip of land is where the story unfolds.

And notice when: "In the days of Herod..." This is Herod the Great, as he's known. Herod was born in 70 BC and died in 4 BC. The events here in Luke 1 probably **occurred** shortly before his death, around 6 BC.

Now, I want to stop here with a little parenthesis and cover something that I didn't cover last time, and I think raised several questions for people. And that is, when exactly was Jesus born? If you ask the average person when Christ was born, 9 times out of 10, you're going to get the answer that He was born at year 0. He was born between BC and AD, between "Before Christ" and anno domini (in the year of our Lord) or "After Christ".

But that's not true. The reason is the calendars in the New Testament era were very confusing. There wasn't one calendar; there were several calendars - different ways different cultures tracked time. There was the Seleucid calendar. One version of it, the older Macedonian calendar, started with October 7th, 312 BC. The Babylonian calendar started at April 3rd, 311 BC. Then there was the Greek calendar. The Greek calendar was based on the Olympiad, and it dated from July 1st, 776 BC. The Romans had a totally different calendar. Their calendar started from a rounded date for the founding of the city of Rome - January 1st, 753 BC. And so, you had all of these competing and conflicting calendars in which time was kept, and it caused a great deal of confusion.

Trying to base our calendar on the birth of Christ didn't begin until the year we know as 525 AD - 500 years after Christ. It was the work of a man named Dionysius. Dionysius was preparing Easter tables, and this is what he wrote: "We have chosen to note the years from the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. And from that point on, time was reckoned as BC and AD based on the calculations done in the 500s AD."

But he was wrong. We know he was wrong. He had... He did the best he could with the documents he had, and he came very close. But we know it couldn't have been then. Why? When was Jesus born? Well, there are two very interesting pieces of evidence, that grow out of this very passage we're looking at, that help us understand when Jesus was born.

The first one is Herod, and the death of Herod. This is the major help in fixing the date of the birth of Christ because we know that Herod the Great was alive when Jesus was born. The New Testament tells us that he is the one (Herod the Great) who ordered the death of the infants in Bethlehem in response to the visit of the Magi. We know from secular history that that man, Herod the Great, died between March 29th and April 4th, 4 BC. So, he died in the spring of 4 BC. So, Jesus, then, was born no earlier than the winter of 4 BC because He was alive before Herod died. And no earlier - Jesus was born no earlier than 6 BC because Herod had all the children two and under killed, remember? Which means that the time the magi gave him was less than two years. So, it was in that window of 4 to 6 BC.

Now, there's another clue here in Luke 1 that helps us, and that is, when Zacharias served his time at the temple. Remember, he served in the course of Abijah we discovered last time - one of the divisions of the priesthood? The priests served in rotations based on families. Zacharias heard about John's birth while he was serving at the temple. So, both John's birth and Jesus' birth can be figured from that time.

You remember, back last century, a number of famous writings were discovered in the Dead Sea area called the Dead Sea Scrolls. One of the things that was discovered in the Dead Sea Scrolls was a six-year almanac which tells us the annual rotation of the priest divisions began on Tishri 1st. Now, I'm not going to labor walking you through all that that means. Just trust me when I say, when you put all the evidence together, it leads then to the Annunciation to Mary - to Mary about Jesus' birth - in the spring with Jesus' birth around the time of the winter solstice.

As far as the exact month and day, we can't be sure. But in ancient tradition, in the eastern church, it's reported to be January 6th, probably in the year 5 BC. In the western church, it's always been believed December 25th, probably in the year 6 BC. Now, the year, **the** date rather (the 25th), I understand and have read all of the writings of well-meaning Christians who think that it was actually some sort of pagan celebration. The truth is at the time that it was instituted, Christians were not into embracing, "*syncretistically*", the pagan festivals.

And so, **in** reality, there's a man named Hippolytus. Hippolytus was a Christian in the 2nd century. And in his writings, he tells us that the December date (December 25th), was held to be Christ's birth date as early as his time in the 2nd century BC. It only began to be observed in the time of Constantine.

Now, the major argument against a December birth date for Christ is - the one that's normally brought up - is that there were shepherds in the field, right? They'll say (people will say), "Can't be! Had to be spring because there were shepherds in the field." Harold Hohner in his excellent book (former professor of DTS and now with the Lord) in his excellent book on the chronology of Jesus' life lists a number of reasons why that's not necessarily true. One of them is that the animals that were going to be sacrificed at the temple, were kept year-round in the fields outside

of Bethlehem. **It's** ironic, isn't it, that that night the shepherds invited to Jesus' birth, may very well have been those keeping the lambs intended to be sacrificed? And they got to go see the Lamb of God born that night. So, Jesus then was likely born in the winter, December or January, of 5 or 6 BC.

That places the announcement to Mary and her pregnancy, beginning in late March or early April of that year, which ironically coincides with the date of his birth or the date of His death, rather, is the announcement to Mary and her pregnancy and His death come in the very same time period of the year. And all of that means that the announcement to Zachariah came in September or October of 6 or 7 BC. That's the historical context.

Now, why do I belabor that? Because we have a tendency, sitting in 21st century America, to think of these things as myths and fairy tales. They're not! These were real people, living in real places, in real time. Even Rabbi Simmons, with his view of Jesus, doesn't deny the historicity of the events; he denies the claims. And so, it had a historical context. As Luke begins his gospel, he says, "*I've carefully investigated. I've talked to the eyewitnesses. And let me give you the details.*" Our faith is not built on wishful thinking. It's built on a historical event, and a historical person, in a real geographical place.

That brings us to the second movement we looked at last time. The second movement introduces a godly priest, a godly priest. Look at verse 5: "In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth." Zacharias was a simple country priest, married to a woman whose name was Elizabeth. Both of them were descendants of Aaron.

Verse 6 says, "They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord." This means they had come to enjoy imputed righteousness, that is, they had recognized their sin, confessed their sin, and come to enjoy righteousness from God because no one is inherently righteous before God. So, the fact that He saw them as righteous means they had come to that place in their lives. But they also had

practical righteousness because they walked blamelessly in the commandments and requirements of the Lord. So, here in the sight of God, is a righteous couple.

And yet, that's not how all of their contemporaries would have seen them because of verse 7: "But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years." Verse 25 says this brought disgrace to Zacharias and Elizabeth. Why? Because they lived in a culture that believed your circumstances in the world, were directly the result of God's favor or disfavor. So, here's how the argument went. Since children are a blessing from God, and since you don't have children, that must mean that God is displeased with you, which must mean there is some hidden sin in your life that He is chastening you for. That was their perspective. And so, it brought disgrace and shame to this godly, righteous couple.

That brings us to the third movement in the story we looked at last time: a unique privilege. A unique privilege. Verse 8: "Now it happened that while he [Zacharias] was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering." There were about 18,000 priests in the time of Christ - too many to serve all at once at the temple most weeks. And so, they served on rotation. For a week, twice every year, they traveled to Jerusalem, and they assisted with all the duties of the temple. The events recorded here, Luke tells us, occurred during one of Zacharias' two annual weeks - the fall week almost certainly. He would have belonged to a **division** of about 750 priests. Again, there were only a few special duties and 750 men there that week to fulfill those duties. And so, not all of them could have a turn. They would therefore draw lots. They did it by stones - black stones and white stones. And that day, Zacharias drew the most prized opportunity of all. He got the white stone. He drew the lot to go into the temple and burn incense. It was the one duty every priest most wanted to do. It was so special that the Jewish Talmud says that a priest could only do it one time his entire life and many priests died without ever having this opportunity. So, Zacharias then had never done this before, would never do it again. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

So, Zacharias, when the time came and he was signaled, he and his two assistants that he would have handpicked would have gone to that massive bronze altar where the animal sacrifices were burned. They would have ascended the stairs up the 15 feet to the top of that structure **and** gotten some of the ashes, the burning coals, from that fire where the animals were burned as a sacrifice to God. And the other assistant would have taken fresh incense and together the three of them would have walked up those twelve steps to the front of that massive temple that Herod built - 50 yards across, 50 yards high at the entrance. They would have walked into the area called the Holy Place. And then they would have paused for a moment. One of the assistants would have walked forward and placed the burning coals on the golden altar of incense in front of that curtain that divided the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. And then he would have quietly backed away and left the temple. The second assistant would have walked up and laid, next to those burning coals, fresh incense. Then he too would have quietly backed away and left the temple.

And there is Zacharias standing all alone inside the temple. As a priest, he would have waited his entire life for this moment. He knew his responsibilities. He'd been taught well. His responsibility was first to say a prayer, to say a prayer for the redemption of Israel, God's people, to say a prayer for the coming of the Messiah. And then he would have quietly walked up to the front of that altar, that golden altar of incense, and taken the fresh incense and had put it on top of those burning coals. And immediately the smoke would have begun to ascend. And that was to picture the prayers of God's people rising like a sweet smell into His presence. What a remarkable moment! And all of heaven stood breathlessly waiting for what would happen next.

At that very moment, the story turns to a fourth movement: an angelic messenger. An angelic messenger. Look at verse 11: "And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense." Now, folks, when we read the Bible, I think it seems to us that this kind of thing happened all the time and that all these people were used to it, and **we** become somewhat jaded to it. This did not happen all the time. In fact, if you look at the flow of biblical history, there were relatively few occurrences of an angelic announcement, especially when you remember that through the span of human history, there were millions of people who lived and



thousands of years of history. So, it's not like it happened every day to everyone. For the most part, their lives were just like ours. Even in the biblical record, it was very, very rare.

If you were to look at just the Old Testament, for a moment - consider the Old Testament.

Depending on the date of creation, the Old Testament history spans somewhere between 4000 years and 10,000 years. But within that period of time of 4 to 10,000 years, there were really only two periods of intense miracles and angelic pronouncements. One of them was the time of Moses about 1400 years before Christ, for a span of about 100 years. The other was the time of Elijah and Elisha in the 800s BC - 800 years before Christ - and again spanning about 100 years. Then you come to the New Testament era, and you have Jesus and the apostles beginning with His ministry through 70 AD. So, at the most, 70 years or so - 80 years from the announcement of His birth.

So, most of the miracles, listen carefully, most of the miracles that God has ever performed in the history of the world, were largely concentrated into about 300 years of human history. Outside of those times, miracles and even angels were rare. The last miracle in the Old Testament, the last angelic appearance in the Old Testament, was all the way back in the time of Daniel. You remember the story of Daniel in the lion's den? That was it. The last angelic appearance in the Old Testament was 500 years before Zacharias. Just to put that in some time perspective for you, imagine for a moment that an angel showed up here this morning in this place and the last time that had occurred was around the time Columbus sailed for the New World.

But not only had angelic appearances been scarce for hundreds of years, so had any message from God. For hundreds of years the heavens had been brass. You see, from the beginning of human history, God had spoken. From the time of Moses, God had spoken in almost every generation through a prophet. But when you come to Luke 1, the last time God had spoken through a prophet was through the prophet Malachi, 400 years earlier. For 400 years, God had been silent. For 400 years, no word from God. For 500 years, no angelic appearance. So, what happened to Zacharias that morning was...or that afternoon, was truly amazing.

You see, after he offered the incense offering, after he put that incense on those burning coals and the smoke began to ascend and he began to withdraw himself from the holy place, suddenly an angel appears standing on the right side of the altar, that is, to Zacharias' left. And look at his response. Verse 12: "Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him."

Very picturesque language the Greek text uses here. His heart was stirred up like the stirring of the waters in a storm. And literally fear fell on him. It's like a predatory animal pounced on him. That's how the fear was to him. He was overwhelmed with fear.

You know, this is always the reaction when men encounter angels because they're not the chubby little children of popular imagination. Angels are always presented in the Scripture as male with masculine pronouns and masculine word endings. And although two classes of angelic beings, the cherubim and the seraphim, have wings there is no evidence, scripturally, that most angels do. We just don't know. They are incredibly intelligent, powerful beings. So powerful that in 2 Kings 19, one angel - in the time of Sennacherib, King of Assyria - one angel kills 185,000 men in one night.

The angel who appeared to Zacharias introduces himself by name. Look at verse 19: "The angel answered and said to him, 'I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.'" It's interesting because in the Scripture only one angel is called an Archangel, and that's Michael in Jude 9. That title "Archangel" implies authority over other angels. Michael is also called, in Daniel 10, one of the chief princes. That suggests there may be others who share his role; there may be other archangels. If there are other archangels, it's possible another one of those is Gabriel because he's the only other angel besides Michael that's named in the Scripture. His name means either (and we can't be sure) "man of God" or "God is powerful". It was Gabriel who brought the vision of the 70 weeks to Daniel back in Daniel 8 and 9. Here Gabriel announces the birth of John the Baptist to Zacharias. Six months later, he will announce the birth of Christ to Mary, later here in this same chapter.

What I want you to see is that morning or afternoon, we can't be absolutely sure which of the incense offerings Zacharias was offering, it had been 500 years since an angel had appeared. It

had been 400 years since God had spoken through a prophet. But on that one special day in the life of a humble godly priest, that once in a lifetime opportunity God finally breaks His silence. He sends Gabriel who stands in His presence.

And that brings us to the fifth movement in the story as it continues to unfold: an extraordinary announcement. An extraordinary announcement. Verse 13: “But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son...’” As Zacharias stood there, alone in the holy place in the temple with the Angel Gabriel, that incense was burning, you remember? And the smoke was going up, picturing the prayers of God’s people - pictured the reality that the prayers of God’s people were to Him like the sweet smell of that incense. Little did Zacharias know it but his prayers we’re about to be answered.

Notice the angel says, “your petition has been heard”. “*Your prayer has been heard*”. What prayer? Probably two prayers. First of all, a personal prayer, his prayer for a child. As we learned last time, he was older than 60 years of age. Undoubtedly, like couples before them and after them, he and Elizabeth had prayed for a child. But then their hopes had flickered and gone out with time because, eventually, Elizabeth’s cycle stopped, and it became obvious that her childbearing years were over. At some point, they probably stopped praying. We know that because, when Gabriel tells him it’s going to happen, Zacharias doesn’t even think it’s possible, as you see down in verse 18. So, God was about to answer a personal prayer that he and Elizabeth had stopped praying years before.

But at the same time, God was going to answer another prayer of Zacharias. It was his priestly prayer. Because, at that very moment, remember, as the priest dealing with the incense offering, he was taught to pray for the redemption of Israel. He had been praying that God would send a Redeemer, a Savior, the long-promised Messiah. And all of a sudden, Gabriel shows up and says, “your petition has been heard.”

And the angel goes on to explain that both of his prayers, both of his petitions, are going to be answered in one person. Verse 13: “your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.” “*You’re going to have a son*” - that’s the personal request. And that son is

going to be the one who announces the coming of the Messiah. Both of your prayers have been heard and answered. *“Call him John”*.

You know, when God named someone, the meaning of the name is always important. There was no one in their families named John. In fact, look over in Luke 1:59: “[When John was born] And it happened that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to call him Zacharias, after his father [I mean, that makes sense - Zacharias Jr.]. But his mother answered and said, ‘No indeed; but he shall be called John.’ And they said to her, ‘There is no one among your relatives who is called by that name.’ And they made signs to his father, as to what he wanted him called [remember at this point he can’t speak]. And he asked for a tablet and wrote as follows, ‘His name is John.’ And they were all astonished.”

Why John? Do you remember what Zacharias’ and Elizabeth’s names mean? Zacharias means “God remembers”, that is, God remembers His covenant promises. Elizabeth means “God is the absolutely reliable one”. So, what happens when “God remembers His promises” and “God is the absolutely faithful reliable one” have a child? He’s to be called John because John means “God is gracious”. God will remember His promises. He will show His absolute faithfulness by being gracious, by sending the messenger to announce the arrival of the Messiah. What an amazing turn of events!

Now, I have to admit to you that when I read verse 13, my heart is filled with a number of observations of the profound spiritual implications for us, especially when it comes to our prayers. Let me just briefly point them out to you. Jot these down. Think about them. Meditate on them.

Here are some implications related to our own prayers from what happens in this verse. Number one: the prayers of God’s people always rise to Him like the smoke of that incense rose toward the heavens. Smoke rises; can’t be contained. It’s going to rise. It pictures the absolute necessity **of the prayers** of God’s people rising into His presence. Listen, are there times when you pray, and it seems like **the** ceiling is brass? It goes nowhere. No one hears. God wanted us to know, even by that amazing picture of the smoke rising off of that incense, that our prayers,

the prayers of His people, always ascend into His presence and they're a sweet smell to Him. God always hears whether you feel like He hears or not.

Secondly, God always answers prayer in His time and in His way. Sometimes He does it right away. Sometimes, as in this case, He does it years later, after we've stopped praying, maybe even after we've forgotten that we prayed.

Thirdly, prayer fits perfectly into the sovereign, eternal plan of God. Think about this with me. 400 years earlier, 400 years before, God had prophesied through the prophet Malachi that the Lord would come into time and space. But first would come a messenger. It was going to happen. Nothing could stop it from happening. But when it actually happens, it is the answer of God to the prayer of Zacharias. What does this tell us? It tells us that the same God who declared the ends, declared the means. He would send His messenger, but He would send Him in response to the prayers of a simple, humble priest.

Listen, don't allow your confidence in God's sovereignty to undermine the importance of prayer in your life. In His sovereign plan, God may have decreed, in eternity past, to do what you're praying about, and to do it in response to your prayer. In other words, in an amazing display of God's wisdom, our prayers become part of the outworking of God's sovereign, eternal plan. They work together.

Number 4. Verse 13 also shows us that God is never doing just one thing when He acts. He's never doing just one thing when He acts. I mean, when we have issues coming to our lives, particularly trials, what do we always say? "I wonder what God is trying to do" - as if God **has** only one thing in mind. That's never true. Look just in this verse. Here in this verse, God is doing a number of things. He's giving this elderly, godly couple a son in answer to their prayers. He is preparing for the Messiah. He is fulfilling prophecies made hundreds of years before. And He was doing countless other things, including accomplishing your spiritual rescue 2000 years later. That is the intricacies of the sovereign purpose and plan of God. So, "*Zacharias you're going to have a son. You're to call him John*" - "God is gracious".

Now, notice the rest of Gabriel's extraordinary announcement because he fills out who John will become and what his ministry will be. Notice how he'll be received - verse 14: "You will have joy and gladness..." For Zacharias and Elizabeth, John would understandably be the source of great joy and gladness. We would expect that. But John's impact will reach beyond his parents. Notice the second half of the verse: "and many will rejoice at his birth." The clear implication is they will not only rejoice that God has answered Zacharias' and Elizabeth's request for a son, but they're going to be thrilled for different reasons, because of what he will eventually become, and he will eventually **accomplish**. The clear implication is this is one people have been waiting for, the one promised by God.

Notice his character and gifting. Verse 15: "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord..." And if you're great in God's sight, you really are great. Jesus himself said, a few chapters later in Luke 7, "I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

Notice his unique position of service. Verse 15 says, "he will drink no wine or liquor..." No wine or strong drink. Wine wasn't forbidden for all of those who were believers in God. This was a special thing. This probably meant (we can't be absolutely certain) but this probably meant John was to be a Nazarite. You remember in Numbers 6? There was this special vow - the Nazarite. He was to abstain from drink. He was not to cut his hair. And, while nothing is said here about cutting John's hair, it's likely that that too was forbidden if, in fact, he was to be a Nazarite.

The Nazarite vow was normally a temporary vow but in the Old Testament, probably two men had permanent, lifetime Nazarite vows. One of them was Samson, who was a figure of mixed character, and the other was Samuel - both probably Nazarites from birth. This spoke of being set apart in a unique way for the service of God. So, John would be especially set apart for God's service.

And he would be equipped. Verse 15: "and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb [literally, from out of mother's womb]." You see, in the Old Testament times,

before the coming of the Spirit of Pentecost, the Spirit of God came upon specific individuals to empower them for a unique task. This text says he will be empowered especially by God from the moment he leaves his mother's womb - his entire life and ministry.

And what is that ministry to be? Well, notice Gabriel explains John's ministry in verses 16 and 17. I just want you to think about the first part of it as we finish our time together this morning. And we'll consider the rest of it next week. But look at verse 16. Verse 16 tells us he will be a prophet preaching repentance: "And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God." That expression is an Old Testament expression. It was the core of the ministry of the prophet. Jeremiah says that God sent prophet after prophet, calling the people to turn to Him, and they would not. So, He sent judgment on them. He's talking about conversion. He's talking about turning from being an idolater to being a true worshipper of the true God. That will be the ministry of this man, John. It will be a ministry of conversion or repentance.

It's interesting, after John's birth, we don't hear anything about him until Luke 3. Look at Luke 3. In verse 3 - verses 2 and 3 - he shows up in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance as an expression of the forgiveness of sins. And Luke gives us a glimpse into what his ministry will be like (his ministry of repentance) beginning in verse 7. I wish I had time to **walk** through this with you. Maybe we will briefly next week. But essentially, he says to the people who come out to him to be baptized, "*Listen! If you want to prepare for the Messiah, you need to repent. You need to turn from those things, very practically, which you are doing in your lives, which dishonor the king who's coming. You need to repent!*" And he gives them very practical instructions about what that looks like.

And then, notice what he concludes in verse 15: "Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, John answered and said to them all, 'As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming [the Messiah] who is mightier than I, and [in fact] I am not fit to [be His lowest slave, that is to] untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire [that is, He will either baptize you with His spirit and you'll become one of His subjects, one of His followers, or He will baptize you with the fire of judgement].'"

Notice what he - how he explains this in the next verse, verse 17. He uses the image of a threshing floor: "His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn [in other words, His true followers (those who know Him), He will gather to Himself]; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." He will bring judgement on those who refuse Him.

He's coming! Be looking for Him. And prepare for Him by repentance. John was a prophet preaching repentance.

Now, folks, all of us have Christmas traditions, things we do to prepare for the celebration of Jesus' birth. What important things are on your list? - maybe decorating the house, decorating the yard, buying all the gifts, scheduling some time for the family, going to some play or concert that's a tradition, watching a particular holiday movie. We all have our lists and there's nothing wrong with those things. But when God wanted to prepare His people to receive their Messiah, their King, He sent a messenger to prepare the way. And that messenger came preaching, what? Repentance. Here's the point the only real way to prepare for the coming of Jesus the Messiah is a heart of genuine repentance. If you want to really prepare to celebrate the birth of God's only Son, prepare your heart to honor Him by expressing a genuine, humble heart of repentance.

Let me just ask you. Are there private sins in your life right now that you'd do everything you can to protect and preserve and foster and feed and encourage? Is there a pattern of sin in your relationships right now that you and everybody in your relationships knows about? Are there issues about which the Spirit of God has convicted you now or over this past week you know are wrong and you've failed to deal with them? Listen! If you want to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ rightly this week, it's not with tinsel and Christmas trees and gifts. If you want to celebrate the birth of Christ in a way that honors Him, prepare your heart by genuine repentance, acknowledge to God your personal guilt, your need of grace, your need of forgiveness, and your desire to change, and ask Him to give you real, genuine repentance.



Maybe you're here this morning and you've never really repented of your sins. You've never really gotten alone with God and acknowledged how you have offended Him and broken His law and sinned against His rule in your life. There's no better way for you to prepare for Christmas than for you to get alone somewhere this afternoon and to confess your sins to God, hold nothing back. Explain to Him you understand how much it offends Him. And express your willingness to turn from those sins and to follow Jesus Christ as your Lord and your Savior. Then you will have a heart prepared to celebrate the birth of the Messiah.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for this time. Thank You for Your Word. Oh God, may we prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of Your Son, the Messiah, by having genuine hearts of repentance. And Father I pray for the person here this morning who's never expressed genuine repentance towards You, who's never been willing to turn from their sin. May this morning they see the offense that they are against You, and may they prepare their hearts by turning in repentance. And Lord we know that if that happens, it'll be because You have done it as an expression of Your grace. And then they can really celebrate the birth of the Messiah. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen!