

**The Voice**  
**The Voice (Part 2)**  
**Luke 1:5-25**  
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All four Gospels begin their accounts of the life of Jesus with an incredible announcement. I want you to see that, so keep your finger here in Luke 1 but, just for a moment, turn back to Matthew 1. Matthew 1:1, “The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the son of Abraham.” Turn to Mark, chapter 1. You see the same thing, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Messiah, the Son of God.” Turn back to Luke's gospel and look over at 2:11. Chapter two verse eleven, and through the announcement of the angel we hear this: “For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Messiah the Lord.” Turn over to John's gospel. John, of course, doesn't give us a record of the human birth of Jesus. He gives us the story of the birth of Jesus from the divine perspective. But notice John 1:17: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ [who is the Christos, the Messiah]”. So, understand then, that all four of the gospel records begin with the announcement that Jesus of Nazareth is in fact the long-awaited Messiah.

Now where did **this** idea come from? Well, the Old Testament ends promising that the Lord Himself will enter time and space, but before He comes, He will send His messenger, a unique prophet who will come in the spirit and power of Elijah. That messenger will announce the coming of Messiah. We noted last week Malachi 3:1. The last written Old Testament prophet says this: “Behold I am going to send My messenger and He will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming.” The Messenger will come and then the Lord will come as Messiah. That Old Testament promise is why, even though all four gospel writers don't include the birth of Christ (only Matthew and Luke do), all of them include and begin with John the Baptist.

So, this long section that we're studying in Luke 1 about John, is not somehow extraneous. Instead, it is about Jesus' rightful credentials as the Messiah. John is the divinely chosen witness to the true Messiah. He's the promised one; the promised messenger who has come to announce Messiah. He is the voice as Isaiah 40 puts it. That's why the Christmas story in Luke's gospel

actually begins, not with the announcement to Mary, but with the announcement of John's birth to Zacharias. And that's why we're studying this passage together, because he is at the heart of the Christmas story.

Now as this story unfolds, here in Luke 1, I noted for you last week that it does so in several remarkable movements. First of all, you have the historical context. Verse 5 says, "In the days of Herod, King of Judea..." It happened in Judea; that is the land of the Jews, **and** it happened in the days of Herod. Herod the Great was born in the year 70 BC and died in the year 4 BC. These events that we're reading about here in Luke 1 occurred just a couple of years before his death around 6 BC.

Now, let me stop here and just say, if you ask the average person on the street when Jesus was born, nine out of ten of them will say what? "Between BC and AD". But that's simply not true. You have to go back to understand how we got this calendar system that we have. **The** attempt to base our calendar on the birth of Jesus Christ first began in the year 525 AD. It was the work of Dionysius Exiguus. He got close, by the way, in his designation of the year but he did miss it slightly. So what year, exactly, was Jesus born? Well I'm going to take just a moment to make this clear to you, because there are two interesting pieces of evidence about the year Jesus was born that actually grow out of this passage.

The first of them is the death of Herod the Great. We're told, here, that John was announced, and shortly, thereafter, Jesus' birth was announced, and he was born during the time of Herod. Well, the death of Herod is a major help in fixing the birth of Christ, because we know Herod was alive when Jesus was born. He's the one who ordered the death of the infants in Bethlehem in response to the visit of the Magi. We know from secular history, that Herod the Great died between March 29th and April 4th in the year 4 BC; so in the spring of 4 BC. So, Jesus was born no later than the winter of 4 BC and no earlier than 6 BC. He had to be born before Herod died, and since Herod had the children 2 and under killed, that must mean that the time the Magi had given him for the star they saw, must have been less than two years. So that's one piece of evidence - the death of Herod.

The second piece of evidence, in establishing the birth of Christ that's here in this text, is back in verse 5. If you look at Luke 1:5 there's a reference to the priestly course of Abijah. I mentioned to you last week that priests served in rotations, based on families. Zacharias heard about John's birth while he was serving at the temple during one of his rotations. Both John's and Jesus' birth can be figured from that because, with the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran, there was found a six-year almanac that tells us when the priestly rotation happened. The annual rotation began on Tishri 1, in the Jewish calendar.

Now I'm not going to take you through all of it, let me just give you the conclusion. When you put the evidence together, we arrive, based on the course of the priests serving at Jesus' birth, around the time of the winter solstice. As far as the exact month and day, well, we can't be absolutely sure. I think you know that there are two ancient traditions. In the eastern church, the birth of Christ has been celebrated as January 6th. **If** that were true, then based on the chronology we just talked about, it would probably have been January 6th, maybe in the year 5 BC. In the western church, the tradition dates to December 25th. If that were true, we're probably looking at December 25th in the year 6 BC. Now according to one of the ancient church fathers, Hippolytus (he ministered in the late second century), he maintained, when he wrote in the late second century, that the date of Christ's birthday was held then to be December 25th. But, because celebrating birthdays, period, (forget Jesus' birthday) was held to be pagan by the early church, it wasn't celebrated or observed until the time of Constantine. So put all that together. Jesus was likely born in December or January in the years either 5 or 6 BC, and possibly on December 25th. Now, that places the announcement to Mary, and her pregnancy, beginning in late March or early April, and the announcement that we're studying here, to Zacharias, in September or October of the year before. That's the historical setting.

Now the second movement of this story includes, or introduces as I should say, to a godly priest, a godly priest. We noted this last time; the events of these first two chapters of Luke likely come either from an interview that Luke had with Mary, or, from a document or diary that she had written, and from which he, under the inspiration of the Spirit, borrows. Notice how this godly priest is described in 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 just a simple priest, married to a woman whose name was Elizabeth. Both of them, descendants of Aaron. Verse 6 says, “They were both righteous in the sight of God...” That is, they enjoyed imputed righteousness. “No man living is righteous before You,” the Old Testament says, and they were not an exception to that. They were, instead, righteous in the same way we are, with the imputed righteousness, the gift that God gives. In addition, they enjoyed practical righteousness. Verse 6 says they walked blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord - not in perfection but in direction. So, in the sight of God, this was a couple with an unblemished reputation.

And yet, in their culture, there was a great blight on their reputation. Verse 7, “But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.” In a culture that embraced retribution theology, people looked at Zacharias and Elizabeth, and since children are a blessing from the Lord and they didn't have any, that must mean, in this way of thinking, that God was in some way greatly displeased with them. This is what they bore through their entire lives.

Now that brings us to a third movement in the story. It's in verses 8 through 10 - a unique privilege, a unique privilege. Again, we finished up last time looking at this. But look at it again - verse 8. “Now it happened that while he 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 some 18,000 priests who lived at the time of Christ. And so, they couldn't all serve at the temple at one time, except on the great feasts. But they served on rotation for a week twice every year. The priests traveled to Jerusalem and assisted in their division with the duties of the temple. The events recorded here are during one of those special weeks in which Zacharias was to go to the temple and serve.

Now, I noted for you last time, that were really just a few very special duties at the temple. The one duty that, without exception, every priest wanted most of all, was burning the incense on the altar of incense right in front of the Holy of Holies. A priest could do it only once his entire life. Many priests never got the opportunity, and so Zacharias is chosen by lot. And for him, this is a

once in a lifetime opportunity. They would have taken **the** hot coals off of that bronze altar that stood out in the courtyard, where the animals were slain and their bodies were burned (the appropriate portions) on that great altar 15 feet high, 30 by 30. They would have walked up the stairs, taken the coals from that altar, and then descended that set of stairs and walked up to the temple itself. Now, with the two assistants along with him, Zacharias would have ascended up those steps and come to that great temple, the Holy of Holies. And in front of it, where they would have gone, the holy place. Zacharias and his two assistants entered the temple. One of the men took the hot coals from the bronze altar that he received out in the courtyard, **and** he placed them on the altar. Then he slowly backed away and left the temple. The second assistant would have had fresh incense, and he brought that incense up, and he laid it next to those hot coals there on the golden altar of incense, in front of the massive curtain. And then he, too, backed away and left. Zacharias is now inside the temple all alone.

Don't miss the drama of this moment. Here's a priest who's over 60 years of age. For more than 30 years he has done his service at the temple. This is the only time, in those more than 30 years, he's been selected for this duty. It's the only time he will be, in his entire life. So, what does he do as he stands there alone in front of that curtain, knowing that behind it is the Holy of Holies that represents the presence of God? He did what every priest before him had done. He said a prayer for the redemption of his people, and then he walked forward, and with great dignity, took those pieces of fresh incense and dropped them on those burning coals, and immediately the smoke began to rise. And it rose up in that room, and over and around that massive curtain into the very throne room of God, the Holy of Holies, representing the prayers of the people ascending to God. That's the unique privilege that was his, and all heaven breathlessly waited for what would happen next.

And at that moment the story turns to a fourth movement: an angelic messenger. Notice verse 11, "And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense." Now when you read that, because we have the breadth of biblical history and we read it, I think it seems like this kind of thing happened all the time, to almost everyone, and so we can become somewhat jaded to it. But if you look at biblical history, there were relatively few times that an angel made an announcement, especially when you remember that we're talking about millions

of people over thousands of years of human history. So, get it out of your mind that this happened like, all the time, to every believer. That's simply not true. It was very, very rare, even in biblical history. The Old Testament covers somewhere between four to ten thousand years, depending on the exact date of the creation. There were only three primary periods of miracles in the Old Testament and the first part of the New Testament era. You had Moses in the 1400's BC. There were a lot of miracles performed at that time, in Egypt and beyond. Then you had Elijah and Elisha in the 800's BC. And then you had Jesus and the apostles in the first century AD. So, when you look at biblical history, Old and New Testament, most of the miracles, not all of them but most of them, were concentrated in about three hundred years of human history. Outside of those times, miracles and even angels, were extremely rare. The last miracle in the Old Testament, you know what it is? The last miracle in the Old Testament, and the last angelic appearance were 500 years before Zacharias; it's when an angel shut the mouth of the lions and preserved the life of Daniel. To put that in perspective, imagine if an angel showed up here this morning, and the last time it had happened was when Columbus sailed for the New World. That's the timeframe we're talking about.

Not only had angelic appearances been scarce for hundreds of years, but so had any fresh word from God. I mean, from the beginning of human history, God had spoken. And from the time of Moses, 1400 years before Christ, He had spoken in almost every generation through a prophet. When you come to Luke 1, the last time God had spoken was 420 years earlier, through the prophet Malachi. So, what happened to Zacharias that day was truly amazing.

After he offered the incense offering and began to back away from the altar of incense, suddenly an angel appeared, standing, we're told, to the right of the altar. That would have been to Zacharias' left, standing there by the golden altar of incense, representing the prayers of God's people, next to the fire that he himself had just put the incense on.

Look at Zacharias' response. Verse 12, "Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him." Fear gripped him. His heart was stirred up. Literally the text says, "Fear fell on him." He was overwhelmed with fear. This is not what Zacharias was expecting, by the way. Fear is always the reaction when men encounter angels. They're not the chubby little children of

popular imagination. Angels are always presented as male, with masculine pronouns and word endings. And there are two classes of angelic beings, the seraphim and the cherubim, who are presented to us in Scripture with having wings, but there's no evidence that most angels do. They are incredibly intelligent, and they are immensely powerful. In fact, they're so powerful that a single angel killed 185,000 men in one night.

This angel introduces himself to Zacharias by name. Look at verse 19, “The angel said to him,” I’m sorry verse 13 not 19, “The angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid Zacharias, for your petition has been heard’”. And then in verse 19, he gives us his name, “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.” “I am Gabriel.” You know, Scripture identifies Michael as an archangel in Jude 9. That title implies what? It implies authority over other angels in Daniel 10. However, Michael is called one of the chief princes. That implies there may be other archangels. If so, then Gabriel almost certainly is. He's the only angel besides Michael that's mentioned by name in Scripture and Gabriel means either (we can't be sure) either “Man of God” or “God is strong.” Jewish writings say that Gabriel was the angel who destroyed 195,000 Assyrians, although we can't be sure of that. We do know this: we're told that Gabriel is the one who brought the vision of the 70 weeks to Daniel in Daniel 8 and 9. And we also are told that Gabriel, here, announces the birth of John to Zacharias, and six months later he announced the birth of Christ to Mary over in verses 26 and 27. Now step back for a moment from this text and just remember it had been 500 years since an angel appeared. It had been 400 years since God had spoken. But on that special day in the life of a simple, humble, godly priest, God finally broke His silence and He sent Gabriel, who stands in His presence.

The fifth movement in the story is an extraordinary announcement. We see this in verses 13 to 17, an extraordinary announcement. The first part of that announcement concerns an answer to two prayers. Verse 13, “But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid Zacharias, for your petition has been heard.’” As Zacharias stood there alone in the holy place of the temple with this angel in front of him, remember he has just put fresh incense on the altar of golden incense. The smoke is rising; filling the room; going around, wafting behind and over that curtain into the throne room of God, representing the very throne room of God. And what was that incense? Picturing

the prayers of God's people entering into His presence. It pictures the reality that the prayers of God's people are like the sweet smell of that incense in the nostrils of God. God hears the prayers of His people and they are a sweet thing to Him. Zacharias didn't know it but God was about to answer both his prayers.

Notice Gabriel said, verse 13, “Your petition has been heard.” What petition? What prayer? Well, it's probably referring to an answer to two prayers, actually. First of all, his personal prayer for a child. Zacharias and Elizabeth were now old; verse 7 says they were “advanced in years.” They were certainly over 60. Undoubtedly, like many couples have before and after them, even some here in this room, he and Elizabeth had prayed for a child, and they prayed, and they had prayed, and they had prayed. But when Elizabeth's cycle stopped, it became clear to them that her childbearing years were over. It became clear to them that God was not going to answer their prayer by giving them a child. And so, at some point they had stopped praying. How do we know that? Because in a moment, Gabriel is going to tell Zacharias that he's going to have a child, and what's his response? “It's not going to happen.” So, they've stopped. God was about to answer Zacharias' personal prayer, a prayer that he and Elizabeth had stopped praying years before, certainly more than a decade. At the same time, God was about to answer another prayer of Zacharias, and that was his priestly prayer for the Messiah.

As I told you, at that very moment, as he presented the incense offering like all of the priests before him, he would have been praying that God would finally send the Redeemer, He would send the Savior, He would send the long promised Messiah; and Gabriel shows up, and he says, “Zacharias, your petition has been heard.” And he goes on to explain that both of these petitions are going to be answered in a single person. Verse 13, “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.” Name him John.

Now when God names someone, I think you understand that the meaning of the name is always vitally important. So why the name John? Well first of all, remember the names of this couple and what they mean. Zacharias means “God remembers.” That is, God remembers His covenant promises.



Elizabeth means “God is the faithful, reliable One.” So, think about this, the child of “God remembers His covenant”, Zacharias, and “God is the absolutely reliable One,” Elizabeth, their child is to be called John. What does John mean? “God is gracious.” God will remember His promises and He will show His absolute faithfulness to His people by being gracious and sending His messenger to announce the arrival of the Messiah. What an amazing verse. What an amazing set of circumstances. What amazing Providence. And yet there is in verse 13, or there are, I should say, in verse 13, a number of profound spiritual implications for us.

I just want to hit the pause button for a moment and bring these implications to your attention. When it comes to our prayers, this verse reminds us, number one, that the prayers of God's people always rise to Him. He always hears; the righteous cry, and the Lord hears. They rise to Him like the smoke of that incense entered the Holy of Holies. Listen, if you are in Jesus Christ, if you have repented and believed in Him, God always hears. The righteous cry, and the Lord hears. He heard their prayers, and He hears yours.

Secondly, this verse reminds us that the genuine prayers of God's people are always a sweet smell to Him. Don't ever think when you come into God's presence, and we're all tempted to think this, that you're somehow imposing on God, that you really have no right to be there. That's true in and of yourself, just as it's true for me. But we come in and through our great High Priest, and our God is delighted to hear our prayers. It's like a sweet smell to Him because it shows our dependence. It shows that we recognize that everything we have, and everything we need, comes from Him. It's a sweet smell to Him.

Thirdly, this verse reminds us that God always answers prayer in His time. Now there are times, of course, when God says “No,” but often God says “Yes.” And when He does say “Yes,” it's important to remember that “Yes” doesn't always happen immediately. Sometimes God answers our prayers years later, decades later; after we've stopped praying that prayer, maybe even after we've forgotten that prayer, but God never forgets. He never forgets and He always answers in His own time and in His own way, according to our best and His great glory.

Number four, and this is hugely important, prayer perfectly complements the sovereign, eternal plan of God. You know, several of you came to me after our study on election in Romans 9, and I'll touch on this, Lord willing, the next time we go back to Romans 9; but you came to me saying, "Well, what about our prayers **for** those who are lost? Does that matter?" The answer is a huge, "Absolutely yes!" And this passage reminds us of that reality. Think about what's going on here. 400 years before, God had promised through Malachi that the Lord would come, but that first, He was going to send His messenger.

By the way, He had even said this was going to happen 700 years before, through the prophet Isaiah, in Isaiah 40, "the voice crying in the wilderness"; but 400 years before, He said He'd send the messenger. It's going to happen. Nothing could stop it. God says it is a certainty.

But when it actually happens, it is God's answer to the prayer of Zacharias. Think about that for a moment. God has heard your petition. God says, "I'm going to send the messenger that I always said I would send, but I'm going to send him in response to Zacharias' prayer." What does that tell us? It tells us that the God who decrees the ends, also declares the means by which those ends will be accomplished. He would send His messenger, but He would send him in response to the prayers of a simple, humble priest.

Folks don't ever allow your confidence in God's sovereignty, to somehow undermine the importance of prayer in your thinking. The two are not antithetical. The two are perfectly complementary, because in God's sovereign plan, He may have decreed in eternity past to do exactly what you're praying about, and to do it in response to your prayer. You have a lost child, lost family member, friend who doesn't know Christ. Listen; you pour out your heart before God on behalf of that person, because who knows but that God has chosen that person in eternity past and intends to bring them to faith in answer to your prayer, just as He brought John the messenger in response to the simple prayer of a godly priest. In other words, think of it like this: prayer becomes part of the outworking of God's sovereign, eternal plan. It's part of the plan. God, who decided to send the messenger, decided to send him in answer to Zacharias' prayer. Do you see? God's sovereignty doesn't mean you should pray less. It means you should pray more.

There's a fifth lesson, an implication, for us here, in verse 13; and that is, when God acts, He is never just doing one thing. I can't tell you how often in my own life, and how often I've heard other Christians say when something comes into their lives, "I wonder what God is doing?" as if God is doing like, one thing. You know, He's simple like us, and He's just got this one thing He's trying to accomplish; that is not our God. He is far more complex and complicated than that. He's always doing far more than we could begin to imagine here. Think about this. He gives this elderly, godly couple a son in answer to their prayers. They get John; they get a son in their old age, and He prepares for the Messiah. He's planning to send the Messiah. And so here's the guy who's going to help prepare for Messiah.

And thirdly, He is fulfilling prophecies and promises that He made hundreds of years before about the Redeemer, and the one who would come before Him. He's doing all of that at the same time in your life, when circumstances come into your life. When God, in answer to your prayer, responds, it's never simple. It's never one thing. God is doing, He is doing so much more. God may be doing something in your life today that is not about you at all. It's about the next generation, or for generations from now.

Gabriel says, "You're going to have a son, and you must call him John - "God is gracious." The rest of Gabriel's extraordinary announcement is a description of John himself. We see this in verses 14 to 17. First of all, there is the response to John's birth in verse 14. "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth." Obviously, for Zacharias and Elizabeth, John would understandably be the source of great joy and great gladness. Can you imagine? You prayed your entire life for a child, for a son, and nothing. You're into old age, and God responds; great joy and gladness. **But** notice John's impact will reach beyond his parents and family, because Gabriel says many will rejoice at his birth. The implication is, there are people who will be thrilled at John's birth for different reasons than his parents. Their joy is going to be because of what John will eventually become, and more importantly, because of what he will accomplish. He will be the one they've been waiting for, the one who was promised by God as the messenger to prepare the way for the Messiah. That's the response to his birth; joy, gladness, rejoicing.

Verse 15 gives us the nature of John's character and his gifting. Notice it says, "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord." Was that fulfilled? Oh yeah! I mean, Jesus says in 7:28 of this gospel, "Among those born of women there is no one greater than John". Up to this point, there's been nobody greater. Think about all the great names of the Old Testament. Think about those heroes whose lives we celebrate. Jesus says they're nothing compared to John, and yet he who is least in the kingdom of God (that's us) is greater than he, because we're part of a new era.

Verse 15 goes on to say, "...and he will drink no wine or liquor." No wine or strong drink. This probably meant that John was to be a lifelong Nazarite. You remember **the** vow of Nazarite in Numbers 6? By the way, it's not mentioned here, but if that's true and it appears to be true, then he would also have been forbidden to cut his hair. You remember what an imposing figure John would have been when he came to his ministry; there in the wilderness of Judea, clothed in camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, eating locusts and wild honey, and with hair that's never been cut. That would have gotten people's attention. Now the Nazarite vow was usually temporary, according to Numbers 6, but we know that Samson and Samuel were likely Nazarites from birth. Apparently, so was John. What did a Nazarite vow mean? Essentially it meant this - you were set apart for God. John would be uniquely set apart for God's service.

And verse 15 goes on to say, he would be uniquely empowered to do so. Notice it says, "...and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb." In the Old Testament times, the Spirit of God came upon specific individuals to empower them for a unique task, and that's going to happen to John. But notice it says "...while yet in his mother's womb." Literally, the Greek text says this, "from out of his mother's womb." He will be filled with the Holy Spirit from out of his mother's womb. In other words, he would be uniquely empowered by the Spirit for his ministry and that empowerment would begin from the womb. By the way, if I can cross-pollinate here a little bit what we've been learning from Romans 9, this only accentuates, in another way, God's election, His choice.

In verses 16 and 17 we see the nature of John's ministry. Gabriel explains that John's ministry, essentially, is going to be twofold. Now in the few minutes we have remaining, I just want us to consider the first part of John's mission this morning and, Lord willing, next Sunday morning

we'll finish with the second part of his mission. But look at the first part of his mission. He is a prophet, preaching repentance. Verse 16 says "...and he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God." This expression comes from the Old Testament. This was the core ministry of an Old Testament prophet. Keep your finger here but turn back to Jeremiah, Jeremiah 44. And there are a number of texts I could take you to, but just look at this one, Jeremiah 44:3. He talks about the wickedness of the people; they've provoked me to anger, God says, continuing to burn sacrifices to serve other gods whom they've not known, neither you nor their fathers. Verse 4: "Yet I sent you all My servants the prophets, again and again..." Here, God is talking about how He's tried to work with His people in spite of their sin. He says, *I sent you the prophets*. And what did the prophets do? Here's what they said. "Oh, do not do this abominable thing which I hate. But they did not listen or incline their ears," notice this, "to turn from their wickedness..." That was the mission of the prophet. He was to come and to proclaim the truth of God, to turn people from their sin back to God.

In New Testament terms, we're talking about conversion. We're talking about radical change of a person. Let me just say, as we've learned **in** the book of Romans, Christianity is not about a change of **your** mind only. It involves that, obviously. But Christianity is about a change at the core of your person. Christianity means you become a different person than you were before. You have new desires. You have new interests, new loves, new hates. That's what it means to be a Christian. And so, this expression, "to turn to the Lord" implies that very change. In fact, it's used this way in the New Testament. Look at the Book of Acts. In Acts 9:35, Peter's ministry is here described, and it says when they saw the miracle that Peter worked, it says, "they turned to the Lord." There's that expression, "they turn to the Lord." This is regeneration. This is heart change. This is a radical transformation of who they are as a person.

Look over in Acts 11:21. "The hand of the Lord was with them as they were", (verse 20), "preaching the Lord Jesus," preaching Jesus as Lord. Verse 21 says, "And a large number who believed turned to the Lord." Faith is part of conversion. It's part of turning away from sin, to the Lord. Go over to 14:15. As the crowd of pagans tries to worship Paul and Barnabas, verse 15, Paul says this: "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you..." And what change do they expect? "...that you should

turn from these vain things,” (these idols), “to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM.” He says, *Listen, we're preaching the gospel to you, and that gospel demands repentance. It demands that you turn to the Lord from your sins.* This is the heart of the gospel.

Now, after the birth of John the Baptist, we don't hear anything more about him until Luke 3. Turn there with me; Luke 3. He's supposed to be a prophet who turns people back to the Lord. Well, notice what happens in Luke 3:2, speaking of (verse 2) John, the son of Zacharias, the word of the Lord came to him in the wilderness. Verse three, “And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance...” Turn, turn from your sins, to the Lord, “for the forgiveness of sins; as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight.’” So what did he preach? Well, notice verse 7. “...he began saying to the crowds who were going to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers...’” There's a seeker sensitive message! “...who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.” And he says, *Listen, judgment's coming.* “...the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” And so, the crowds were saying, *Ok, judgment's coming! What do we do? What does repentance look like?* “And he would answer and say to them, ‘The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none.’” In other words, the guy who's hoarding is to share. “...he who has food is to do likewise.” “... tax collectors came to be baptized, and they said to him, ‘Teacher what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.’” Don't use your position to extort money from people. “Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, 'And **what** about us, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages.’” By the way “soldiers” in this context, is really talking more about what we would call police in our culture. You're a policeman? Here it is: don't take money from anyone by force. Don't accuse anyone falsely and be content with your wages.

“Now while the people were in a state of expectation,” those are just samples, obviously, of repentance. “...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 [Messiah], John answered and said to them all, ‘As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’” “Holy Spirit” meaning regeneration, change, for some of you, and “fire”, judgment, for others of you. And he describes that judgment in verse 17. “So with many other” (verse 18) “exhortations he preached the gospel to the people.” This was the ministry of John.

Now, what's the “so what” in this for us? You know, we all have Christmas traditions; things that we do to prepare for the celebration of Jesus' birth. You know, we decorate **the** house, and we decorate the yard. We make sure we buy the gifts for our family and friends. **We** schedule time for family to be together. We plan, maybe, a couple of parties for friends to get together. We go to a concert, or a play, or maybe there's a particular holiday movie that's always a tradition we want to watch. We plan what we do to celebrate the birth of Christ. And there's nothing wrong with any of those things; our family does them as well. **But** when God wanted to prepare His people to receive their King, what did He do? He sent a messenger to prepare the way. And that messenger came preaching what? A message of repentance. Here's the point: the only way to prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ is a heart of genuine repentance.

If you want to really celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, prepare your heart to honor Him by expressing a humble heart of repentance. If you're here this morning and you're in Christ, let me just ask you a couple of pointed questions; questions I've had to ask myself this week, and now I ask them to you. **Are there** sins in your life that you are desperately trying to protect because you don't want to give them up? Are there sins that you are feeding, that you are encouraging, that you are doing everything in your power **to** inflame? Is there a pattern of sin in your relationship with others? Let's start in your home. How are you doing in how you treat your spouse? How are you doing in how you treat your kids, or kids, how you treat your parents? Are there issues in your life, as I talk about sin and repentance, that the Holy Spirit is convicting you of right now? If you want to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, in a way that honors Him, then prepare your heart by genuine repentance. Sometime before this day is done, acknowledge to God your

personal guilt. Acknowledge your need of His grace and forgiveness, and express to God your desperate desire to change, and your commitment to do everything in your own power to pursue that change, knowing that only He can truly change you. And ask Him to produce real repentance in your heart. You want to celebrate Christmas? That's how the coming of Christ was really to be celebrated.

Maybe you're here this morning, and you've never truly repented of your sins. Listen, there's no better way for you to prepare for Christmas, than to get alone this afternoon and to confess your sins to God. Express your willingness to turn from those sins and your full and complete confidence in Jesus of Nazareth; His perfect life, His substitutionary death, and His resurrection, as your only hope of ever being right with God. And plead with Him to extend mercy to you, like the tax collector in Jesus' story; "God be merciful to me, the sinner." And Jesus said, when those words are combined with a genuine heart of repentance, "that man went down to his house justified." That's the assurance you have from God. I hope even today, you will prepare to truly celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ in God's way.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for the truth of Your Word. Thank You for the reminder that this is the real preparation for Christmas. Father, even this week, as we anticipate celebrating the birth of our Lord a week from now, Lord, I just ask that You would work in our hearts true repentance. That we would be changed, that, those of us who are in Christ, that our hearts and minds and lives would be changed in our response to sin in our lives. And Father, for those who are not in Christ, may they throw themselves even today on Your mercy. May they turn from their sins and their idols to You, the living and true God, through Your Son Jesus Christ, in Whose name we pray. Amen!