

2

God Has Spoken Again¹

God spoke to the humans he created. They knew him personally. However, God gave them a choice; they could obey him or turn away from him. They turned away, but God did not stop speaking to the people he created. He spoke through the writers of the Bible. He spoke through his messengers: the angels and the prophets. His prophets said, “Turn away from sin;² turn back to God.” If the people turned back to God he forgave³ them and rescued them. But he had to rescue them again and again.

Then at last, an angel announced, “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”⁴ Jesus came to rescue all people and to make it possible for them to return to God. Luke gives us historical details that tell us when and where Jesus was born.⁵

Luke 1:5 “In the time of Herod king of Judea...”⁶

Luke 2:1 “In those days Caesar Augustus...”⁷

Luke 2:4 “Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea...while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born.”⁸

That same angel announced the birth of another baby, named John. His parents were old and could not have children, but God gave them a baby boy. John grew up in the

¹ If you are studying in a group, have each person think of two or three questions to ask the others: Where were you born? What part of town do you live in? What’s your favorite sport? Look for connections with other people, for things you have in common.

² Sin is not just robbery or murder. Sin is disobeying and dishonoring God. Sin breaks our relationship with the God who made us.

³ To forgive is to let go of or to forget about a wrong that someone did to us. When God forgives us, he takes away our bad record of sins against him. When we forgive others, we cannot take away their bad record, but we can let go and forget all about it.

⁴ Luke 2:10 “Savior” means “One Who Saves.” “Christ” is Greek for the Hebrew word, “Messiah.”

⁵ See the background paper, “The Christmas Story.”

⁶ Herod ruled the Jewish State from 39-4 BC. He was called a king, but he was under Roman rule. Jesus was born around 6-4 BC.

⁷ Caesar Augustus was a title for Gaius Octavius, the great-nephew of Julius Caesar. He ruled Rome after Julius’ murder in 44 AD.

⁸ You will find all these places on the map on page . The background information comes from the *NIV Bible Dictionary*.

desert and became a great prophet. He spoke the “word of God.” Notice the different ways in which God speaks in these texts.

Part One: The Prophet John

Luke 3: 1-6

LOOK OVER the Text

1. The text begins with a list of Roman and Jewish officials. The governor and tetrarchs were Roman. The high priests were Jewish. Underline all the people and places in the text below.⁹ How do the details show Luke’s purpose?¹⁰
2. John quotes from the Old Testament. Before you read, put a box around the quote from the prophet Isaiah.
3. Read Luke 3: 1-6.

3:1 In the fifteenth year of the rule of the Emperor Tiberius: Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip was ruler of the territory of Iturea and Traconitis; Lysanias was ruler of Abilene, 3:2 and Annas and Caiaphas were High Priests. At that time, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.

3:3 So John went throughout the whole territory of the Jordan River, preaching, “Turn away from your sins¹¹ and be baptized,¹² and God will forgive your sins.¹³ 3:4 As it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah:

⁹ Look for capital letters.

¹⁰ Review Luke 1:1-4, for Luke’s purpose in writing the gospel. (Details are specific bits of information.)

¹¹ Sin is any action or thought that goes against God’s laws.

¹² Baptism is a ceremony with water. The water is a symbol for cleaning. When we are baptized, we show others that God has “washed away” our sins and changed our heart.

¹³ When God forgives us, he takes away the sin that separates us from Him. He has the power to clean and to change our hearts.

7. Compare John's command in Luke 3:3 with the quote from Isaiah in Luke 3:4. How does John prepare people to meet the Lord?

LINK to the Geography of Israel

The modern country of Israel was founded in 1946, but ancient Israel goes back to Abraham, who lived around 2000 BC. Abraham's grandson Jacob had twelve sons, and the nation of Israel was made up of twelve tribes.¹⁸ After King Solomon's death, the ten northern tribes were called Israel and the two southern tribes were called Judah. Only the southern tribes stayed faithful to God.

By the time Jesus was born, this land was part of the Roman Empire. In 40 BC, Herod became king of the Jews. Most of the Jewish State was under his rule. When he died in 4 BC, the land was divided into provinces. The country of Syria was also a Roman province. These lands were all included in the Roman census¹⁹ in Luke 2.

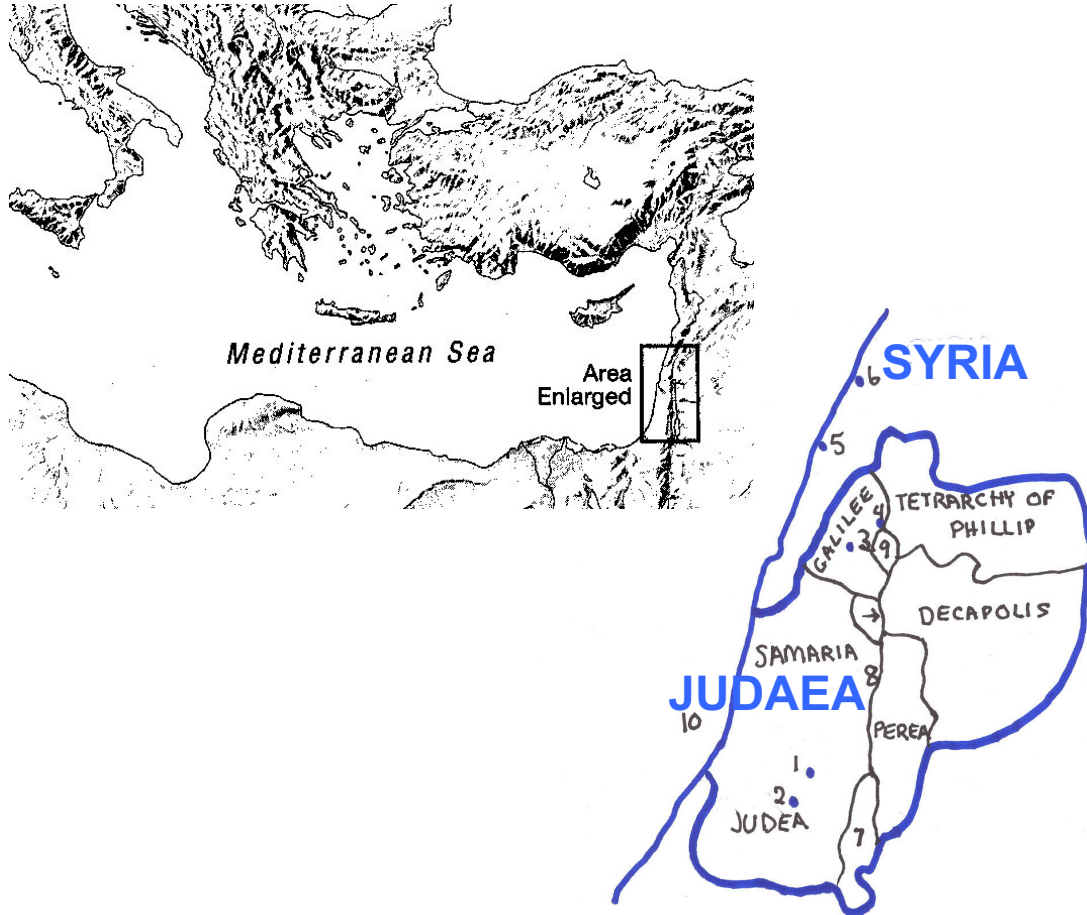
Here are some of the people and places in the first few chapters.

- | | |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Luke 1 | Joseph and Mary were from <i>Nazareth</i> in <i>Galilee</i> . |
| Luke 2 | Jesus was born in <i>Bethlehem</i> in <i>Judea</i> . Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple in <i>Jerusalem</i> . |
| Luke 3 | John baptized Jesus in the <i>River Jordan</i> . |
| Luke 4 | Jesus spent 40 days in the desert, probably near <i>Jericho</i> . He returned to <i>Galilee</i> where he healed people in <i>Capernaum</i> and preached in his hometown of <i>Nazareth</i> . |

¹⁸ God called Jacob "Israel." See also Luke 1: 33.

¹⁹ A census is an official count of all the people.

The Roman Province of Judaea²⁰



Color the Tetrarchy of Philip and the Decapolis gray. This was the land of the Gentiles.²¹ Most of ancient Israel was made up of Judea, Samaria, Galilee, and Perea. All together, these regions became the Roman Province of Judaea. Outline their borders. Color the water blue for the River Jordan, Lake Galilee, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Dead Sea. Number the cities. ___ Nazareth and ___ Capernaum are in Galilee. Capernaum is next to Lake Galilee. ___ Bethlehem and ___ Jerusalem are in Judea. Bethlehem is south of Jerusalem.. ___ Tyre and ___ Sidon are near the Mediterranean Sea in the Province of Syria. Sidon is north of Tyre.

²⁰ The map of the Roman Empire is from *Nelson's Complete Book of Maps and Charts*, 1993, Thomas Nelson, Inc.

²¹ A Gentile was anyone who was not a Jew.

5. John tells people to turn away from their sins and be baptized. Jesus has not turned away from God.²⁵ Why do you think Jesus came to be baptized?

LIVE What you Learn

Discuss one of these questions:

1. The Bible says that there is sin in every one of us.²⁶ Do you agree? Give examples to support what you say.
2. John said in Luke 3:3 that God will forgive you. Share a story about a time when God or another person forgave you for something.

Consider this:

God has spoken again. God spoke through the angel, “the Savior is born.” God spoke through the prophet, “the Lord is coming.” God’s Spirit came down on Jesus, and the Voice from Heaven gave him a personal message. Now the time has come for Jesus to speak for God.

Don’t miss it! If you think you are so good that you do not need God, you will not be ready to hear God speak. Sin is not just robbery or murder; it is disobeying and dishonoring God. We have all done that. So when the prophet says, “Turn away from your sins,” God is speaking to us all.

The Final Word

“In the past God spoke to our forefathers²⁷ through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”

Hebrews 1:1,2a NIV

²⁵ There are words in this passage that show that Jesus has not turned away from God. The Bible says that Jesus did not sin at all. (Hebrews 4:15, I Peter 2: 22.)

²⁶ See Romans 3:23. We all fall short of God’s measurement of goodness.

²⁷ Forefathers are ancestors, such as your great, great grandfathers.

The Christmas Story

The ancient biographies of Jesus are called “gospels,” which means “good news.” Good news is something we want to talk about, to spread around to others, to announce to the world!

Luke begins his good news with two baby announcements. Proud parents will send cards or emails to say that their baby was born. God sent angels. Angels are messengers from heaven. They can look like a human, but they are something else. The Angel Gabriel took God’s message to two families. The angel told them that God was sending a child to each family. Each baby was unexpected; each birth was a miracle.

One mother, Elizabeth, was old and not able to have children. Elizabeth’s husband worked in the temple.²⁸ The angel came to him. The angel said God was going to answer their prayers. They were going to have a son. Her husband went home to his wife. Elizabeth became pregnant, and they had a baby boy. This baby became a famous prophet. He was known as “John the Baptizer” or “John the Baptist.”

The other mother was young and unmarried. When the angel came to her, she was “greatly troubled.”²⁹ The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Mary, God has been gracious to you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus.” Luke 1: 32

Wow! A baby! But Mary was a virgin.³⁰ She was promised in marriage to a man named Joseph, but she was not married. She believed the angel, but she had no idea how God was going to do this! She asked, “I am a virgin. How, then, can this be?” Luke 1: 34

The angel said, “The Holy Spirit will come on you and God’s power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God.” Luke 1:35

Mary cried, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it happen to me as you have said.” Luke 1:38 And Mary became pregnant.³¹

Joseph was a good man, but he had trouble believing Mary’s story about the angel and God. So the angel Gabriel came to talk to him in a dream. The angel told Joseph that

²⁸ The temple was the Jewish house of worship to God.

²⁹ Almost everyone who sees an angel in the Bible is afraid!

³⁰ A virgin is a woman who has never had sex with a man.

³¹ Joseph is not the father. God gave the baby to Mary without sex.

the baby was from God, and Joseph believed him. Joseph took Mary home with him as his wife, but he “had no union with her until she gave birth to a son.”³²

Mary and Joseph had to travel before the baby was born. They had to go to Bethlehem, the town of Joseph’s ancestor, King David. Each man in Israel had to register in their hometown so the government could count all the people in the Roman Empire. It was a long trip, and Bethlehem was very crowded. The time came for the baby to be born.

Jesus was not born in a house. All they could find in that crowded town was a place for animals. He did not have a bed. All they could find was a feeding box for animals, called a manger. They wrapped Jesus in strips of cloth and put him in the manger. They did the best they could.

What a quiet, dirty birth for the baby from God! Where is the angel? Luke gives the historical account in Luke 2: 1-20. This text is read each year as Christians celebrate Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ.

2:1 At that time Emperor Augustus ordered a census³³ to be taken throughout the Roman Empire.³⁴ 2:2 When this first census took place, Quirinius was the governor of Syria. 2:3 Everyone, then, went to register himself, each to his own hometown. 2:4 Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to the town of Bethlehem in Judea, the birthplace of King David. Joseph went there because he was a descendant³⁵ of David. 2:5 He went to register with Mary, who was promised in marriage to him. She was pregnant, 2:6 and while they were in Bethlehem, the time came for her to have her baby. 2:7 She gave birth to her first son, wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger³⁶—there was no room for them to stay in the inn.

2:8 There were some shepherds in that part of the country who were spending the night in the fields, taking care of their flocks.³⁷ 2:9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone over them.³⁸ They

³² Matthew 1:21,24,25b

³³ Census: an official count of all the people (probably for taxes)

³⁴ ESV: “all the world”

³⁵ Joseph is in David’s family line. David is his ancestor – before him in time.

³⁶ The cloths were the usual covering for a newborn baby. The manger, however, was a feeding box for animals. Jesus was born in a place where animals usually lived.

³⁷ Shepherds are people who work with flocks of sheep.

were terribly afraid, 2:10 but the angel said to them, “Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. 2:11 This very day in David's town your Savior³⁹ was born—Christ the Lord! 2:12 And this is what will prove it to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

2:13 Suddenly a great army of heaven's angels appeared with the angel, singing praises to God: 2:14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased!”

2:15 When the angels went away from them back into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us.” 2:16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and saw the baby lying in the manger.

2:17 When the shepherds saw him, they told them what the angel had said about the child. 2:18 All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said. 2:19 Mary remembered all these things and thought deeply about them. 2:20 The shepherds went back, singing praises to God for all they had heard and seen; it had been just as the angel had told them. GNB

The shepherds all saw the angels. They all heard that “Christ the Lord” was born. Yet why did the angels come to them? How did they know that the angel's message was true? The angel said, “And this is what will prove it to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Who would put a baby in an animal's feeding box? They went into the city to look for him. When they found the baby and told the story, everyone was amazed.

The Jewish people had been waiting for God to send the “Christ.”⁴⁰ They knew he was coming to save his people, even though they did not fully understand what this meant. The gospels tell the good news “which will bring great joy to all the people.”

³⁸ Angels are special creatures from heaven who sometimes appear as humans. “Shone” is the past tense of “shine.” The “glory” probably refers to an amazing light.

³⁹ Jesus' name means “Savior,” one who saves, one who rescues.

⁴⁰ This word is Greek. The Hebrew word is “Messiah.”