

God's promise based on facts (Luke 1:1-38)

Today we will study the first half of cp. 1. The theme is "God's promise based on facts".

1. The Gospel is a message of precise facts (v.1-4)

Just like a present-day journalist, Luke carefully investigated every testimony of those who directly heard what Jesus said, and saw what Jesus did, and he put them together as a book based on the facts. That is the Gospel of Luke.

Based on the content of the book of Acts, which was also written by Luke, the established theory is that the Gospel of Luke was written around 58-63 AD. Jesus was crucified around 33 AD, so the book was written about 30 years after the Crucifixion of Jesus. That is, it was written when there were still people who knew the days when Jesus was still alive. If Luke had written anything other than the fact, I'm very sure that there would be strong criticism from inside and outside of churches. And it would not have been accepted as a Canon.

In those days, there were no videos or mp3 recorders, no computers nor photocopying machines. There were only testimonies of people. Then, is there any possibility that all those whom Luke interviewed put their stories together and gave false testimonies?

If they could benefit from giving false testimonies, they may have done so. But, in those days Christians were a minority. Christianity was regarded as heresy by Jews and Christians were persecuted. No one will give false testimonies to be persecuted. Early Christians had been witnessing for Jesus for 30 years even though they had to be persecuted, and risk their lives because of that.

Why? Because they knew they were telling the truth. They didn't change their testimonies because they knew that was the truth about Jesus which they saw and heard. Luke, once again, collected testimonies, investigated them, and put them together as a book based on the facts. That is the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel is a message of precise facts.

2. The Gospel is a message of repentance (v.5-25)

It was Zechariah who heard the message of the angel written from verse 13 onward. He was a priest. A priest is a person who offers sacrifice at the temple.

Zechariah was performing his priest duties, following the Old Testament regulations. He thought by doing that they would be accepted by God. People of Israel in those days believed the same thing, and so the priests performed their duties.

In v.16, Zechariah heard the angel say, "Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God."

When we read this, we may not take much notice of it. But it was Zechariah, the priest, who heard the word. Besides, he was in the temple to perform a special duty, and he heard it there. Simply he was told that by doing what their ancestors have been doing for generations, the people of Israel cannot be saved, but they need to turn back to the Lord. That was a shocking declaration for Zechariah who was a priest.

Only Zechariah knew this incident other than the angel. There was no one who could testify that what Zechariah was saying was true. Then was it possible that Zechariah was telling a lie? He could not be telling a lie like this. Unless this incident is true, he can never think of things like that by himself.

(Luke 1:17) And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

"Turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous."

The people of Israel lived following the law, doing ritual. So they think they are righteous before God. They think they are God's chosen people and they are obeying God. But, here the angel says "Turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous."

On the surface, they looked obedient to God, but actually the people of Israel were disobedient to God.

No ritual, human teaching or tradition can change a person's heart, no matter how hard he studies it and no matter how well he performs it. Natural human heart still disobeys God and is polluted with sin. Only by the work of the Holy Spirit, the hearts of the disobedient can be turned to the wisdom of the righteous.

“Make ready a people prepared for the Lord”

In verse 16, it says “Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God.” Taking these two verses into consideration, to “turn back to the Lord” means to “be ready as a people prepared for the Lord.”

Conventional Jews, offered sacrifice for themselves. They slaughtered an animal and offered it as a sacrifice so that their sins would be forgiven and they could receive God's blessings. That was what conventional Jews had been doing.

But what early Christians did was they offered themselves for God. They offered themselves to God, saying “I have made myself ready as a person prepared for the Lord. Please use me.”

(Romans 6:13-14) ¹³ Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

Conventional Jews were under law. So they never thought of offering themselves as people prepared for the Lord. They could only think of offering the sacrifice of animals for their sin. Only those who were set free from sin and law by Jesus will offer themselves as people prepared for the Lord.

(Romans 12:1 NIV) Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship.

(NASB) Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

People under the law can never regard themselves as “accepted by God”, “pleasing to God”, “holy”, and “righteous”. Because no one is justified by observing the law. People under the law know it very well. Because the law always points out their sins.

Only those who are under grace can regard themselves as “accepted by God”, “pleasing to God”, “holy”, and “righteous”. That is, only those who are under grace can offer themselves as people prepared for the Lord. Only those

who are under grace can truly worship God. This is the power of the Gospel which spread out among early churches. It became remarkable after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and continued to spread out for 30 years. Then the Gospel of Luke was written and now Theophilus was reading it.

Now Theophilus could understand the difference between conventional Jews and early Christians, and the reason why early Christians keep proclaiming the Gospel and witnessing for Jesus at the risk of their lives. If faith for them means just forgiveness of their sins and their going to heaven, they could be secret Christians. But, those who "turned back to the Lord" offered themselves to God to show God's glory. That is the crucial, decisive difference between conventional Jews and early Christians. The Gospel is a message of repentance.

3. The Gospel is a message of grace (v.26-38)

Here it talks about virgin birth. Generally speaking, it is impossible.

Let's remember for what purpose did Luke writes this book and how he starts writing. "Most excellent Theophilus, I have carefully investigated everything about Jesus. Things I wrote here are truth. Please believe what I say."

And right at the start, he wrote about virgin birth. If he had just written this letter so that Theophilus could believe it and come to know Jesus, it would have been more advantageous, convenient for him to skip this part. If virgin birth was a mere doctrine the early church created in order to say that Jesus is the Son of God, Luke would not have put it here. Because no one would seriously listen to a thing like that. If he writes it here, Theophilus may not continue to read it. However, though Luke was fully aware of it, he still wrote this part.

Before this part, Luke wrote about the pregnancy of Elizabeth. Elizabeth became pregnant, though she was an old lady. Generally speaking, it is impossible. As Zechariah was a priest, it was very clear who he was and where he was from. If Luke wanted to investigate, he could meet people who were there in those days and investigate whether it was true. Luke examined the matter. It is told that Luke was a doctor. The pregnancy of Elizabeth and that of Mary were both impossible cases for Luke. So it is very certain that he investigated them carefully. Then, he wrote both cases of Elizabeth and of Mary in his book as the fact.

If Luke just wanted to introduce Jesus to Theophilus and make him believe in Him, it would be a lot easier if he skips this part. But he still wrote this part, because it was the truth. As it was the truth, though it is hard to believe, and can be an obstacle to his purpose, Luke could not skip this part.

Grace is something naturally impossible.

(Romans 4:4-5) Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

Because of our sins, by rights we deserve eternal death. But if we just believe in Jesus, our sins will be forgiven, we will be made new and will live eternal life in God's kingdom. Here naturally impossible thing has happened. That is grace. And grace is not something we achieve by work, but we receive it by faith.

I want you to pay attention to what I am going to tell you now. God doesn't tell us to just believe in something impossible without reason, or thoughtlessly. God's grace is something naturally impossible, but it is a God's promise based on facts. Because it is a God's promise based on facts, we can believe it and receive it, though it is naturally impossible. Christian faith is not a blind faith. We can believe it because it is a God's promise based on facts. And when we believe it and receive it, the grace of God will actually start God's mighty works in us.

v.34: Mary asks, "How will this be, since I am a virgin." It is naturally impossible. How will it be done?

v.35: The angel answers, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." It will be done by God's special intervention, not by human works nor will it occur in the course of nature. That is God's grace, the work of God's intervention.

v.36: "Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age." Elizabeth was Mary's relative. So Mary knew all about the incident of Zechariah and that of Elizabeth. Elizabeth, who was now an old lady, became pregnant. That is naturally impossible. But that happened. She was already in her sixth month. Mary knew all about it. The fact was presented.

v.37: "For nothing is impossible with God." God gave her a promise based on the fact. This is where she should use her faith.

v.38: Mary answers, "May it be to me as you have said." Immediately she responded by faith. And all of us know what had happened later.

We just finished Foundations Class. We studied that our lives as God's redeemed people reveal the kingdom of God in the world. We are living in the world, but not being of the world. The lives of all Christians should be missional.

We may think, "How will this be?"

It is naturally impossible. "living in the world, but not being of the world"

How will it be done to me?

God answers, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

It will be done by God's special intervention, not by human works nor will it occur in the course of nature. That is God's grace.

And God continues, "You are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses." He presents the fact.

Finally He says, "For nothing is impossible with God."

God gave us a promise based on facts. This is where we should use our faith.

"May it be to me as you have said."

What we need is not more knowledge about the Bible, but we need to respond to God's word already given to us by faith, based on the things we already know. Not just by words, but with actions.

Today, we have studied the theme, "God's promise based on facts" from the first half of cp. 1 of the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel is a message of precise facts, The Gospel is a message of repentance. The Gospel is a message of grace.

based on facts

Luke cp.1

¹ Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us,
² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.
³ Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,
⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.
⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.
⁶ Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.
⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.
⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God,
⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.
¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.
¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.
¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

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¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.
¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,
¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.
¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God.
¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."
¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."
¹⁹ The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.
²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."
²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.
²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.
²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home.

based on facts

²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.

²⁵ "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

²⁶ In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,
²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.

³¹ You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.

³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,

³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who

was said to be barren is in her sixth month.

³⁷ For nothing is impossible with God."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.