



God's Covenant Kept: Annunciations and Births

BACKGROUND NOTES

In the first session the major themes and emphases of Luke's Gospel were introduced. Many of these themes appear already in the first two chapters of the Gospel. The emphasis on God's working through Israel to bring salvation to fulfillment, the focus on the cost of discipleship, the importance of the influence of the Holy Spirit, universality, the reversal of social relationships, the place of women and outcasts, and the theme of prayer are all included in chapters one and two.

Parts of the text are very familiar to all Christians, and are laden with emotion. It may take some work on the leader's part to focus the group on the foundation theology that Luke is laying here. Many churches have not paid sufficient attention to the songs and speeches of these chapters. The tendency is to rush to the manger. Do not allow this to happen here, or Luke's excellent background work will be lost.

Some readers will want to discount the Old Testament, even seeing it as being in conflict with the New Testament. The wonder and grace of God's covenant with the people of Israel, however, is central to Luke's understanding of Jesus and the gospel message. At every possible turn Luke ties Jesus tightly to the gracious God of Israel who is fulfilling all the promises of the Old Testament through Jesus. This session should help members of the group to respect and value the Old Testament message and hope.

A word about the virgin birth may be necessary. This is not the place to debate the historicity of that doctrine. While there are those who consider the acceptance of the doctrine to be a matter of salvation, many churches have not given the doctrine prominence. Whatever your views or the views of the group members may be, the virgin birth is not a central issue for Luke. As with other miraculous births in the Bible, Mary's virginity serves as a sign that what is happening here is due to God's activity in human history and not the will of human beings. Luke never mentions or alludes to the virgin birth again. After the initial reference in his birth narrative, neither does Matthew. Mark and John don't mention it at all, nor do Jesus or Paul. Keep the discussion focused on what Luke is saying about who Jesus is and why he has come.

There is no need to harmonize Matthew's birth story with Luke's. Matthew's visit from the Magi and the flight into Egypt to escape Herod are his way of introducing the meaning of the Messiah's coming. Since Herod's order is to slaughter all the boys in Bethlehem that are two years and younger, it has been suggested that Matthew's story takes place long after Luke's and that in the meantime Jesus' family lives in Bethlehem (note the use of the word "house" in Matthew 2:11). The family only moves to Nazareth after the return from Egypt. Society has taken the Lukan story and the Matthean and presented them both in the same nativity scene. It is probably not profitable to get into a discussion of the historical details of either story. The Gospel writers are using these introductory stories, which are extraordinarily beautiful and moving, to establish firmly the identity and mission of Jesus—a very historical figure. Keep the focus on the message. Avoid getting tangled up in the scenery and props by which the message is conveyed.

The role of women is interesting, but the leader should not spend an inordinate amount of time on it here. It will be brought up several times throughout the study. Luke portrays Mary as a woman who puts her trust in God, even in very frightening circumstances and possibly at the risk of her life and certainly her reputation. Unmarried pregnant girls in first-century Palestine were not highly esteemed! Elizabeth is a good woman who is obedient to God's will, but is barren. However, her barrenness is to be used to glorify God. Elizabeth is the first person in Luke's Gospel to speak under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:41-45). It will be women who are the first to proclaim the resurrection message. Anna is respected as a "prophetess" and her voice adds to Simeon's. These things can be pointed out without getting into a discussion on women's ordination. It is the action of God and the nature of Jesus Christ that are central for these chapters and must remain so.

The use of Advent liturgies and hymns may be helpful here both in getting at the heart of Luke's message and in promoting a deeper appreciation for Advent. Advent warns us that we must not go rocketing up to the manger with no understanding of what is happening

there or of what it is going to do to our lives. Advent slows us down and makes us think about the meaning of these events. This is precisely Luke's plan in the opening chapters of his Gospel.

These first two chapters of Luke are far more than introductory. They contain Luke's understanding of who Jesus is, why he is coming, and how he is connected to the covenants of the Old Testament. Luke will continue to press these understandings all throughout his Gospel. It is here that Luke looks beneath the surface of Jesus' life and actions to ask the prime question of theology: "What is God doing?" It is important that your group learn to ask this question. It is too easy for people to look at Jesus' actions and take them simply at face value. They need to learn to ask what it is that God is saying through these actions. In later sessions the group will deal with Jesus' healings not as the magical actions of a powerful man, but as God's announcement of the kingdom. They will see Jesus' riding into Jerusalem on a donkey as the power of God coming to destroy the power of death. Just so here, the group needs to see what is happening in the birth of Jesus.

One final note: it is surprising how many people read the Scriptures to find out what they need to do, and how few people read the Scriptures to find out what God is doing. And yet, the focus of the Scriptures is always on the acts of God. Help the group to keep their eyes on the actions of God. These first two chapters of Luke should set the tone for how to read the remainder of the Gospel.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Identify several of the links made in Luke's Gospel between Jesus and the Old Testament.
2. List some of the purposes stated in Luke 1 and 2 for Jesus' coming.
3. Define and compare the roles of Jesus and John the Baptizer.
4. Retell the story of Jesus' birth in Luke.

Resources You May Need

Recording of "For unto Us a Child Is Born" from Handel's *Messiah*

Newsprint and markers
Copies of the "Two Covenants" worksheet
Hymnals
Lectionary readings for Advent and Christmas Day
Three copies of "Meet the Author" for Session 3

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

1. Lead the group in prayer or introduce the person selected at the previous session to do so.

or

Use the Magnificat (1:46b-55) as an opening prayer of praise.

2. Introduce the three people who agreed to read the parts for "Meet the Author." When they have finished, ask the group to summarize what Luke said about covenants and the pattern of promise and fulfillment in his Gospel.

or

Present a mini-lecture about covenants and Luke's interest in Jesus' ties to Judaism.

and

Play a recording of Handel's "For unto Us a Child Is Born" from the *Messiah*. Ask the group to follow along by looking at Isaiah 9:6 as the music plays. After listening to the recording, read verse 7 aloud. Point out that it is to this promise to David (as well as the promise to Abraham) that Luke looks as he explains the reasons for Jesus' birth.

3. Assign half the group to turn to chapter 1 of Luke. Ask the other half to turn to chapter 2:1-38. Give each half a few minutes to skim their chapters for specific references to Judaism and Old Testament themes. When both halves have finished, ask the first half to call out the references they have found. Record them on newsprint. Repeat the process with the second half. Are there themes or ideas that seem to be especially prominent? What names are mentioned more than once? Save this sheet, perhaps taping it up in the room where it can be seen. In the next activity the group may want

to add to the list, especially including Old Testament allusions that might have been missed.

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. Chapters 1 and 2 of Luke refer to God's covenants with Abraham and David. These covenants form Luke's foundation for explaining the meaning of Jesus' coming. Divide the group into five sections. Give each participant a copy of the worksheet titled "Two Covenants." Assign each section one of the sets of Scriptures and the questions at the bottom of the worksheet. After they have completed their work have each section share their findings with the entire group. Discuss how the covenants made with Abraham and David define Jesus' role and the reason for his coming.

and

List the following passages on newsprint:

Genesis 18:1-14

Numbers 6:1-3

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Malachi 3:1

Malachi 4:5-6

Have someone read each passage aloud. After each Scripture is read, ask what parallel idea is to be found for it in Luke 1 or 2. Record those answers beside the Old Testament texts on the newsprint. Help the group to see that even the style in which Luke writes calls the reader to make connections with Judaism and the Old Testament. Jesus cannot be divorced from the Old Testament. Check the list you saved from the final activity in Setting the Stage. Are there other references which might be added?

2. Five ceremonies or rituals of Judaism are mentioned in the first two chapters of Luke: circumcision, naming, purification of the mother, presentation, and the Passover pilgrimage. If group members have prepared 1-2 minute reports on each of these, introduce them now.

or

Present a mini-lecture on the meaning of these events.

3. The relationship between Jesus and John was important in the early church. John had a following, complete with disciples, before Jesus did. John's disciples had spread to Egypt (Acts 18:24-28) and Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7). The Gospel writers are all therefore concerned to underline the fact that John's position was inferior to Jesus'. See for example, John 1:20, Mark 1:7-8, Matthew 3:13-14. Luke alone devotes space to John's birth. Using this material, Craddock's book and other resources, present a short mini-lecture on the relationship between Jesus and John.

and/or

Ask the group to turn to Gabriel's speech (Luke 1:13-17) and Zechariah's song (Luke 1:67-79). Invite them to help you list on newsprint the elements of John's "job description" found in these passages. To what extent does John fulfill his job? Ask the group to define John's role in one sentence. Note the consistency with which Luke reminds us that Jesus is more important than John.

4. The story of Jesus' birth is so familiar to Christians that the message is sometimes in danger of being lost. In order to hear that story again, divide the group into 4 or 5 teams. Ask each team to rewrite the story found in Luke 2:1-20 by telling it in modern dress (a homeless shelter, perhaps, instead of a stable). As they rewrite the story have them answer the following questions: What might they use for a setting? What might Joseph's occupation be? Why might the couple be without lodging? Who might the shepherds be today?

or

Ask each team to describe the message in Luke 2:1-20 without using a story at all. Take away the "scenery" of the stable, the shepherds, and the angels. Instead simply describe God's actions and what Jesus' birth means for us and for the world. What is God doing? See John 1:1-18 for an example.

CLOSING

1. Hand out hymns to the group. Have them turn to the Advent hymns. Look especially at hymns such as "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus"; "Ye Who Claim the Faith of Jesus"; "My Soul Gives Glory to My God"; "Tell Out My Soul"; "Hail to the Lord's Anointed"; "Blessed Be the God of Israel"; "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"; or "To a Maid Engaged to Joseph," and any others which are related to the stories in Luke 1, 2. Read through the words of several of the hymns with the group, picking out the themes that are found in these two chapters of Luke. Discuss

briefly why it is important not to skip the messages of Advent in our hurry to get to Christmas. Sing one of the Advent hymns.

OR

Have the group look at the Old Testament lectionary readings for Advent and for Christmas Day. See especially year "A." How do these Old Testament passages help us to prepare for the coming of Jesus? How do they help us to develop our expectations? How do they help us to recognize Jesus? Discuss briefly why it is important not to skip the messages of Advent in our hurry to get to Christmas. Sing an Advent hymn.

Looking Ahead

1. Ask three people to prepare to read the "Meet the Author" script for the next session.
2. Invite a member of the group to open the next session with prayer.
3. In Activity #3 in Exploring the Scripture it is suggested that members share newspaper articles that show misuses of power and uses of power that further justice and mercy. If you plan to use this option, ask the group members to bring these articles to the next session.

Meet the Author

Moderator: Once again we welcome Luke, author of the third Gospel, to our meeting. How are you, Luke?

Luke: I am well, thank you, and I am eager to answer your questions.

Reporter: I'd like to begin, if I may. At several points in the verses we read for today there is mention of covenants. Could you explain a bit about what a covenant is?

Luke: That's a very important question. A covenant is an agreement, a promise. A covenant binds both parties to act in certain ways regarding each other. I believe that the covenant that God made with Abraham is the very bedrock on which our faith is founded.

Reporter: But why do you include so many references to Old Testament covenants in these stories of Jesus?

Luke: Why, to show that in Jesus God has kept all the promises made to Israel. Jesus fulfills everything for which God's people have been waiting. Every promise has come true in Jesus!

Moderator: I find it interesting that at so many points in these first two chapters you mention people's loyalty to Judaism. You tell us that Elizabeth and Zechariah keep all the commandments of the Law; Zechariah is a priest, Elizabeth is a descendant of Moses' brother Aaron. You tell us that Mary and Joseph performed all the proper Jewish ceremonies connected with Jesus' birth. Simeon and Anna are in the Temple when they talk about Jesus in terms of Israel and Jerusalem. Why is this emphasis on Judaism so important?

Luke: God is one. There is not one God for the Hebrew Bible and another for the New Testament. The promises that God made were made to Israel and to all who would give themselves to Israel's God. One purpose of the covenants was to bring all people to that one God. Here is the gateway to God. Trusting in God's promises to Israel and keeping the covenants makes us ready to receive the fulfillment of those promises. You will find if you read both my Gospel and the book of Acts that there is a deliberate pattern of promise and fulfillment.

Reporter: Just one more question, if I may. It takes eighty-seven verses before we get to the important part: the birth of Jesus. Why all the preliminaries? Why not get right to it?

Luke: It is important, very important, to understand what is happening with the birth of Jesus. What is God doing? Who will this Jesus be? How does he fit into the Old Testament story of salvation? Are we ready for him? All these questions must be considered seriously before anyone is ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Isn't that why the church celebrates Advent—to think about who Jesus is and to prepare to receive him?

Moderator: Food for thought. We thank you, Luke, for reminding us with eighty-seven verses that we need to be prepared for Jesus' coming. We hope to see you again soon.

Luke: Grace and peace to you all!

Worksheet for Part 2

Two Covenants

Read the passages for your section and answer the four questions at the bottom of the page.

	GOSPEL OF LUKE	OLD TESTAMENT
Section 1	Luke 1:26-33 Luke 2:4-7, 11	2 Samuel 7:16-17
Section 2	Luke 1:54-55	Genesis 17:1-8 Psalms 105:4-10
Section 3	Luke 1:67-71	Psalms 89:1-4, 20-37 Isaiah 9:6-7
Section 4	Luke 1:72-75	Genesis 22:15-18 2 Samuel 22:50-51
Section 5	Luke 2:27-32	Genesis 12:1-3 Genesis 18:17-18 Isaiah 42:6

- With whom was the covenant or promise made? By whom?
- What are God's promises as described in both the Old Testament and the New Testament texts?
- What will be the relationship of Jesus to the Old Testament promises?
- In what way do the covenants become Luke's "job description" for Jesus?