

Advent Bible Study Guide

Passages: Luke 1:45-Luke 2:32

We will be looking at 4 smaller sections within this longer passage. If possible, take some time to read this passage in full and pick out the songs before getting started on the study. If you are happy to do so, highlight the words of the songs in your bible as you go.

We will be looking deeper at 4 songs in this study:

- Zechariah - song of faith (Luke 1:67-79)
- Mary - song of trust (Luke 1:46-55)
- Angels - song of peace (Luke 2:13-14)
- Simeon - song of hope (Luke 2:29-32)

Although we find the first of these songs in Luke 1:67-79, the context is important which is why we need to read Luke 1:5-25 and 57-66 first to know what happened beforehand.

Zechariah was an old man and his wife, Elizabeth was old too. Despite their best wishes, Elizabeth had not been able to conceive and now they felt it must be too late, but God had other ideas. Whilst preparing incense at the alter in the sanctuary, an angel appeared to Zechariah and told him that Elizabeth would soon be pregnant and give birth to a son who should be named John. Zechariah doubted this could happen so before the angel left, he made sure Zechariah could not speak. Despite this, when Elizabeth fell pregnant, she knew it was God's doing. A few months later, Elizabeth gave birth to their child and on the 8th day after his birth, it was time to name the baby. The people said they were going to name him Zechariah after his father but Elizabeth spoke up and said that his name would be John. The people didn't believe this could be right because there was no one in their family named John but when they gave Zechariah a tablet he wrote 'His name is John' and at that, his mouth was opened and he could speak again. Immediately, Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and he began to sing praises to God.

This long period of silence would have given Zechariah time to think and reflect on the things that happened and during this time, he realised that everything the angel had told him was coming true. His faith in God grew and he sung out the words found in verses 67-79 which express the glory of God. Zechariah had clearly understood and believed that this child was not just any child but John would be the 'dawn' who would come before and announce the 'Sun' that would come after, Jesus.

Zechariah learnt a lot in the months leading up to John's birth, perhaps most important of all, that a child would be born after John who would be the Saviour of the world.

Whilst Zechariah was mute, the angel Gabriel visited Mary and gave her the news that she would give birth to a child, the Saviour, and name him Jesus. As well as sharing the news of her baby, Gabriel told Mary about the baby that would be born to Zechariah and her cousin, Elizabeth and she rushed over to visit them. As soon as Mary greeted Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth's womb jumped for joy. At this, Mary broke into song. Once again, this song is one of praise at the news that she had heard regarding her God-given baby boy who would grow up to do great things. Although Mary was shocked, unlike Zechariah, she believed this would happen, and the words of her song reveal that she trusted what the angel had told her. On both of the occasions, that angel Gabriel appeared and spoke to someone, the first words were 'Do not be afraid!' These words were said to bring peace to the shocked person stood before them and also to the shepherds when the angels visited them to share the news of Jesus' birth.

In comparison to the others in the Christmas story, the song of the shepherds is very short, consisting of just 16 words in total. Despite that, those words are powerful and had a huge impact on the shepherds who heard them. This song has been rephrased and incorporated into the well-known song, 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing'. The second verse of the song begins with the words, 'Hail the Heaven born Prince of Peace'. The angels came with a message of peace for the shepherds, not only because they wanted to settle them after the shock of their arrival, but because the One they came to tell others about would also bring a message of peace to the world. In a similar way to John coming to prepare the way for Jesus, the angels also shared a glimpse of who He would be.

The final song takes place after the birth of Jesus when Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the temple. On that same day, an elderly man named Simeon, who was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come, had been led to the temple by the Spirit. He arrived at the same temple at the same time that Mary, Joseph and Jesus were there. When Simeon saw them, he took Jesus in his arms and praised God with his own song. It is clear from the words of the song in Luke 2:29 that Simeon has faith in God, trusts Him and has found peace now that he has lived to see Jesus. Simeon goes on to explain the things that Jesus will grow up to do and be, 'He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and He is the glory of your people Israel!'

Simeon's song is one of hope, and we can have that same hope if we believe in Him. Because of who Jesus is, and the miracles of His birth, life, death and resurrection, we have hope of an eternity spent in heaven with God, which wouldn't be possible if Jesus had not come down to earth as a baby to live as God in human form all those years ago.

So what does this mean for us today?

The 4 songs give us 4 different focuses. 3 of them involving believing. Take a look at the definitions for each of them here:

- *Faith = believing in the existence of*
- *Trust = being willing to hand over control*
- *Hope = grounds for believing something good will happen*
- *Peace = mental or emotional calm*

We can have faith in God by simply believing He exists, but to trust Him, we need to be willing to hand over control to Him and to have hope in Him, we need to understand what He has done for us and believe there is something good for us in the future (i.e. eternal life). Peace is a bit different because it is a state of mind but thankfully, it is not something we have to manage alone. You might be familiar with this popular verse in Romans:

'May the God of hope, fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you might overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit'. (Romans 15:13)

God is a God of hope. To receive it, all we have to do is ask, trusting (handing over control to God, believing He can deal with it) in Him. When we do that, we receive joy (different to happiness) and peace from God, that gives us a calm mental and/ or emotional state. Once we have been filled with joy and peace, the Holy Spirit gives us hope that overflows to those around us too so that they can find hope in God, learn to trust Him, find their peace in Him and eventually come to faith as well.

It's a process. Zechariah was already an old man when he was forced to develop a deeper faith, Mary was helped to trust God when she found out that her cousin Elizabeth really was pregnant with a baby as the angel had said, and Simeon spent all his life holding onto hope, praying that his patience and faith would pay off one day. It takes time to develop and grow these characteristics/ fruits but as the verse in Romans reminds us, we don't have to do it alone. We have the Holy Spirit to help us.

Questions, Thoughts and Challenges...

- 1) If you were to write a song today, what would your topic be? Faith? Hope?
- 2) Have you read or learnt anything new from reading these songs?
- 3) What stands out to you most from these passages in Luke 1 and 2?
- 4) Which characteristic do you want to be better at? Take some time to think about it and pray for it now.
- 5) If you don't know it already, try to memorise the verse from Romans above.