

Bible Study #8

11/5/19

Luke 1

Setting the Stage for Luke

- You are a 30 year old, 1st Century Gentile:
 - Living in Asia Minor in 65 A.D.
 - Married with a family
 - Working in a trade
 - Living as a Greek Pagan
 - Curious about a new religion presented by Paul of Tarsus and his followers based on the teachings of a deceased Jewish rabbi

Judaizers' Requirements

- Circumcision on the 8th day for all males
- Live under 613 Laws
 - 39 prohibited Sabbath activities
 - 26 dietary laws
- Attend three annual feasts at the temple in Jerusalem
- Make all offerings and sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem

Early Church and the Gentiles

- Paul and Barnabas early Missionary Journeys (**Acts 13-15**)
 - Entered each town and attended Sabbath meeting at local synagogue to invite Jews to the New Way
 - After rejection, going to market place and inviting Gentiles to be baptized and join the New Way without accepting the Laws of Moses
 - Follow-on attack by the Jedaizers demanding that the Gentiles become Jews and accept all aspects of the Law before becoming part of the New Way

Early Church and the Gentiles (Cont)

- Peter's encounter with the Gentiles (**Acts 10:1-48**)
 - Peter's dream at *Joppa*
 - The invitation for Peter to come to *Caesarea* by a Roman Centurion
 - The descent of the Holy Spirit and Baptism of *Cornelius* and his family

Early Church and the Gentiles (Cont)

- The **Council of Jerusalem** in 49 or 50 A.D. (**Acts 15**)
 - Presentation by Peter and Paul to accept the Gentiles
 - Arguments of the *Judaizers* party in opposition
 - Acceptance by the council of James (Bishop of Jerusalem) recommendation (based on the Holiness Code) that the Gentiles not be required to be circumcised or keep kosher, but they be baptized and abstain from the following four things:
 - The pollution of idols
 - *Pornea* (unchastity)
 - What is strangled
 - Blood

The Holiness Code

- The **Pentateuch** (First 5 books of the Bible attributed to Moses) is structured with **Genesis** and **Exodus** at the beginning, then **Leviticus** in the center, followed by **Numbers** and **Deuteronomy**
 - At the center of **Leviticus** is the **Holiness Code (Lv 17-21)**
 - At the center of the **Holiness Code** is **Lv 19:2** which states: *“Say to all the congregation of the people of Israel, You shall **be holy** for I the Lord your **God am holy**”*
 - This is why Jesus said that your righteousness goes beyond that of the Pharisees and you must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect (**Mt 5:48**)

The Holiness Code (Cont)

- According to the Law, to be **Holy** (*Kadosh* in Hebrew) means to be “**set apart**, to be different, not profane or common”
 - The issue that makes Israel “set apart” or different from the other nations is this “Holiness Code”
 - Most nations accepted Natural Law to include most of the 10 Commandments
 - But it was the Holiness Code that set Israel apart from the rest of the nations

The Holiness Code (Cont)

- When Israel came out of Egypt (**Ex 12:37***) it consisted of:
 - 600,000 men on foot (that would be over 1 million counting women and children)
 - But there was also a ***mixed multitude*** who went up with them (these were the “sojourners” or God-fearers)
 - Thus, the Exodus was an Israeli and a Gentile event
 - The Israelites who left Egypt were polytheists who had been worshiping the Egyptian gods for the previous 450 years

The Holiness Code (Cont)

- So the God of Israel exhorted them to become **monotheists** and only worship Him, the one true God of Abraham (1st Commandment)
- While Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years God gave them the **Book of Leviticus** to help them to be careful on their way to the Promised Land

The Pollution of Idols (Lv 17:1-9)

- A pollution to idols sounds like it is dealing with idolatry
- As good polytheists the Israelites were used to worshipping and sacrificing to almost anything
- So, if a man left the camp and killed an animal, or if one of his animals died he might be tempted to offer it as a sacrifice to one of the local pagan gods
- Thus, the Israelites were required by (**Lv 17:1-9**) to bring all animals to the door of the tent of meeting so the priest could kill it
- But look this requirement **also applied to the sojourners (Lv 17:8)**

The Pollution of Idols (Lv 17:1-9 - Cont)

- But there was another side to this problem
- Almost all meat that was available to people at that time had been offered in sacrifice to one of the gods
- The best place to eat meat or buy meat outside your house was at the local temple
- So if a God-fearer ate any meat that had been sacrificed to a god he was in fact participating in that sacrifice and therefore was participating in the worship of that god
- Most likely after his conversion Cornelius probably ate at the temple of Zeus or Venus
- Thus, James is stating that this practice must be stopped

Pornea (Lv 18:1-18)

- Next, James addressed the issue of *Pornea* (**Lv 18**)
- Unfortunately the RSV translates *pornea* as “unchastity”
- The laws discussed here deal with Israel’s prohibition of marriages based on consanguinity (blood lines or incest)
- Many of the Gentiles had multiple wives and often they married close relatives (sister, cousin, father’s second wife, niece)
- All of **Lv 18** dictates who one may or may not marry
- These are the basis for our modern Canon Laws concerning incest
- Again, these laws applied to the sojourner (**Lv 18:26**)

Pornea (Lv 18:1-18 - Cont)

- An interesting synonym for sexual relationship is the phrase to “uncover the nakedness of” (Noah and Ham)
- These laws are the basis for our modern Canon Laws concerning invalid, illicit marriage or incest
- Jesus refers to pornea as the only exception for the permanence of marriage in **Mt 19:9**

Blood (Lv 17: 10-16)

- The next two issues dealt with drinking blood and strangulation
 - All men saw **blood** as the **life force** of a living being
 - The pagans believed that if they killed an animal and drank its blood they would receive its life force
 - But God created man in His image and likeness and not in the image and likeness of an animal (**Gn 2**)
 - So if the Israelite or sojourner did this, they might revert back to polytheism

Blood (Lv 17: 10-16 Cont)

- Thus acceding to **Lv 17:10-14**
 - Animals had to be slaughtered by cutting their throats and letting all of the blood drain from the body
 - In fact Israelites were forbidden even to touch blood as this was part of the “clean” vs “unclean” issue
 - This is all about the pagan superstition of the life force and their fertility rituals

What Is Strangled (Lv 19:26)

- Although this prohibition is implied in **Lv 17**, it is clarified here
 - “You shall not eat any flesh with the blood in it” (**Lv 19:26**)
- If the pagan did not slaughter the animal and drink its blood, they would strangle the animal and let its blood coagulate in its veins. Thus one ate the blood along with the flesh of the animal
- The prohibition was designed to prevent the Israelite from reverting back to paganism by eating the blood of an animal

Council of Jerusalem's Decision active at time of Luke's Gospel*

- A Gentile need not be required to be circumcised or keep kosher, but they must be baptized and abstain from the following four things:
 - The pollution of idols
 - *Pornea* (unchastity)
 - What is strangled
 - Blood

Luke 1

- **Luke 1:1-2** *“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word”*
 - Luke is telling us that he was aware of individuals who had already written things down based upon the accounts of eyewitnesses*

Luke 1 (Cont)

- **Luke 1:3-4** *“It seems good to me also, having followed all things closely, for some time past, to write an ordinary account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed”*
 - Luke says that he wrote these events down after checking with eyewitnesses
 - We are not sure who Theophilus (meaning “O friend of God”) was even though Luke dedicated both his Gospel and the Book of Acts to him
 - Most likely, this was a term of endearment for his audience

Luke 1 (Cont)

- This could have meant, “I have written this down for you, “fellow Christians” or “friends of God”
- Father said that the purpose of Luke’s gospel was to confirm what was already known about Jesus
- Because of this, it does not give us all of the details as he assumes that we already know many of these things
- He was providing a written record of the critical information to ensure his audience did not forget them when they gathered together for the Divine Liturgy of the Mass
- Father said that he could not emphasize enough the importance of the liturgy of the early church that gave us the books of the New Testament and theology*

Luke 1 (Cont)

- **Luke 1:5** *“In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah: and he had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth”*
 - Father said that these names could be random, but most likely he wants us to see a specific meaning here
 - *Zechariah* means “God (Yahweh) remembers”
 - So what does He remember?
 - **Genesis 8** reminds us that God remembered *Noah* and *Abraham* when he was saving Lot
 - Thus “God remembered” means that He was keeping His covenant

Luke 1 (Cont)

- The people had been waiting 500 years for the fulfillment of His covenant that a son of David would sit on David's throne in Jerusalem (**2 Samuel 7***)
- God also promised through the prophets that when the people returned from Babylon and rebuilt Jerusalem and the temple, the Glory Cloud would return
- But, this had not happened so the 1st century Jews were wondering when this would occur
- So, here Luke is telling us about a man named Zechariah "Yahweh remembers" who was married to a woman named *Elisheve*, (Elizabeth) meaning "God of oath" (to swear)
- Thus, we can see the image of covenant here*

Luke 1 (Cont)

- **Luke 1:6-7** *“and they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years”*
 - Luke tells us that they were blameless even though they were barren
 - At that time, people thought that barrenness was a curse from God due to sin
 - Obviously, it did not work that way when we look at Sarah, Rebekah, and Hannah

Luke 1 (Cont)

- Barrenness can be seen as a delay of fertility in order to highlight fertility
- Many women were barren and later had children to highlight the importance of that child
- Think of:
 - Isaac born to Sarah
 - Esau and Jacob born to Rebecca
 - Samuel born to Hannah
- So in this case, Luke is stressing the importance of John the Baptist*

Luke 1 (Cont)

- **Luke 1:8** *“now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, it failed to him by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense”*
 - Zechariah was of the division of Abijah
 - During the 500 years from Aaron to David, the number of priests in the line of Aaron had grown very large
 - David divided the sons of Aaron into families within 24 divisions, with each division serving in the temple for two weeks out of the year
 - The eighth division was Abijah*

Luke 1 (Cont)

- **Luke 1:9-13** *“According to the custom of the priesthood, it fell to him by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.... And you shall call his name John”*
 - According to historians, the division of *Abijah* was so large that it needed to be divided into 24 parts
 - This meant that the opportunity to burn incense as determined by lot may occur to a single priest one or two times in their lifetime
 - This means that this moment was the high point of *Zachariah's* priesthood
 - The only priestly duty more important than the twice daily offering of incense was when the high priest was able to enter the Holy of Holies once a year

Luke 1 (Cont)

- The offering of incense was a special moment of prayer, which, according to **Psalms 140**, the priest was hoping that his prayer would arise to the Lord like incense
- While performing this duty, *Zechariah*, met an angel standing at the right side of the altar of incense
- As one would expect when he saw the angel, he was scared to death
- Usually, when an angel appeared people died
- Remember, a single angel wiped out the entire Syrian army at the time of King *Hezekiah*
- In this case, the angel told *Zechariah* that he was coming with good news as his prayers had been heard

Luke 1(Cont)

- The angel told him that his wife would bear a son and he would call him John
- Most likely *Zachariah* had been praying this request for a son since he got married because the priesthood was passed on genetically
- When the priest died without a son, he would be denied giving his son the greatest gift possible
- John (*Yochanan*) means “Yahweh is gracious, Yahweh gives”
- Again, we can see all the references to the covenant in this story*

Luke 1 (Cont)

- **Luke 1:14-15** *“and you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth; for he will be great before the Lord, and he shall drink no wine nor strong drink, and he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb”*
 - This means that he will be a *Nazarite*
 - We will hear of him leaping in his mother’s womb implying that when he was born he had already experienced the Holy Spirit
 - That is why the Church celebrates the birth of John the Baptist, the Blessed Mother, and Jesus*

Luke 1 (Cont)

- **Luke 1:16-17** *“And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and that disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared”*
 - The prophet *Malachi* said, *“that to prepare the people God would send you Elijah”*
 - John the Baptist will fulfill this promise
 - This was in response to the people wondering when the glory cloud would come after they rebuilt the city and the temple

Luke 1 (Cont)

- *Malachi* was telling the people to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord
- The Lord in this context was Yahweh
- The messenger was going to prepare for the return of the glory cloud to the temple
- Thus, John the Baptist comes in the spirit of *Elijah* to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord
- The text implies that he was preparing the way for the coming of Jesus
- Jesus is the glory cloud coming among his people which will become a major theme of Luke's Gospel and highlighted in the Transfiguration*

Luke 1 (Cont)

- **Luke 1:18-25** *“and Zechariah said to the angel how shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.... to take away my reproach among men”*
 - Zechariah was asking: “how is this possible?”
 - Gabriel responds with, “do you know how I am?”
 - He was the angel who delivered the message to Daniel that the Messiah would come in 490 years
 - Because Zechariah did not believe the good news, he was not going to be able to speak
 - He will be bound up with this information but not able to talk to anyone about it
 - He could not proclaim the “good news”*