

Chapter One

THE SETTING



PROLOGUE

Before anything else existed, the Word already was—I am that Word. I was in fellowship with God; in fact, I was God. I was there from the very beginning. Through me God brought everything into existence. Not a single thing was created except that which was created through me. I am the source of all life, and that life has provided light for the human race. The light keeps on shining in the darkness, and the darkness has never been able to put it out.

At a crucial point in time, there came a man whose name was John the Baptist. He was sent by God to tell people about the light so they would come to believe through him. He himself was not that light but the one who was to tell others about the light.

The real light, which was destined to enlighten everyone, was about to come into the world. When I did enter the world, it failed to recognize me even though I had created it. I came to my own creation, but the very people I had created would not receive me. However, to as many as did receive me—that is, to those who believe that I really am who I claim to be—I gave the privilege of

becoming sons of God. This new birth is not by natural means, the result of a physical impulse or because a man made a decision; it is a birth that comes from God.

I became a human being and lived like others. The disciples beheld my glory, the glory of the one and only Son, sent from the Father.

John the Baptist told everyone about me. He exclaimed, “He is the one I was talking about when I said, ‘A man will follow me who is greater than I, for he existed even before I was born.’”

From my infinite supply of grace and goodness, those who believe have received one gracious gift after another. While the Law was given through Moses, it is through me, Jesus Christ, that grace and truth have come. No one has ever seen God. I myself am God and dwell in the presence of the Father. I am the one who told the disciples about God. (*John 1:1-18*)

JOHN THE BAPTIST TO BE BORN

During the reign of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah (“God remembers”) who belonged to the priestly division named after Abijah. His wife Elizabeth had also been born into the priestly line. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, carrying out all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both of them were well along in years.

One day when his division was on duty and he was serving God in the temple, Zechariah was chosen by lot, as was the priestly custom, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. At the hour of incense, a large crowd of people had gathered outside and were praying.

While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord

appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was gripped with fear, visibly shaken. But the angel said, “Fear no longer, Zechariah, for God has heard your prayer; and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear a son for you. Give him the name John. He will bring you great joy and delight, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great as God counts greatness. He is never to drink wine or any other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb. He will cause many in the nation of Israel to return to the Lord their God. Prior to the coming of the Lord, he will break onto the scene with the spirit and authority of the prophet Elijah. He will turn the hearts of the fathers back to their children and the disobedient to the good sense of the upright to prepare for the Lord a nation ready for his coming.”

“But how can I be absolutely sure about this?” asked Zechariah. “After all, I am an elderly man, and my wife is getting along in years.”

The angel replied, “I am Gabriel, and I have direct access to God. He is the one who sent me to tell you this good news. But now, because you did not accept without question what I said—and my words will come true at the appointed time—you will be unable to speak until the child is born.” The people who were waiting for Zechariah to come out began to wonder why he stayed so long in the temple. When he did come out, he was unable to speak to them. They realized that while in the temple he had seen a vision because he kept making signs to them but could not utter a word.

When his period for priestly service was over, Zechariah left for home. Later on, his wife Elizabeth conceived and did not go out in public for five months. She said, “The Lord has looked with favor on me and taken away the disgrace I suffered in public by allowing me to have this child.” (*Luke 1:5–25*)

MARY TO HAVE CHILD BY THE SPIRIT

Five months later God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a young virgin by the name of Mary. (This is the Mary who would become my mother.) She was pledged in marriage to a man named Joseph, who was a descendant of King David. When Gabriel arrived, he said to Mary, “Greetings! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!”

Mary was perplexed by what the angel said and wondered what the greeting could mean. Gabriel responded to her confusion, saying, “Don’t be afraid, Mary, for God has been gracious to you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a Son, and you are to name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will make him a king as was his forefather David, and he will reign over Israel forever. His kingdom will have no end.”

“How could I become pregnant,” said Mary, “since I won’t be living with Joseph as his wife prior to the marriage ceremony?”

The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cast his shadow over you. So the child to be born will be holy and will be called the Son of God. Did you know that your relative Elizabeth will also be giving birth to a child even though she is advanced in years? They said she couldn’t have children, but she is already in her sixth month. God is fully able to carry out every promise he has ever made.”

“Yes, I am the servant of the Lord,” responded Mary. “Let this happen to me as you have said.” Then the angel left. (*Luke 1:26–38*)

MARY VISITS ELIZABETH

A few days later Mary got ready and hurried off to a Judean town in the high country to the house of Zechariah. Upon arriving,

she greeted Elizabeth, his wife. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child in her womb leaped for joy, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In great excitement she explained, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child in your womb! Why am I so honored that the mother of my Lord should pay me a visit? Just think, the moment your greeting reached my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed are you for believing that the Lord's promise to you will come to pass."

And Mary responded,

My soul exalts the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
for he has looked with concern on his lowly servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done wondrous things for me.
Holy is his name.
From generation to generation he shows compassion
to those who reverence him.
He will do wondrous things with his powerful arm;
He will scatter the arrogant with all their plans;
He will bring down rulers from their thrones
but exalt those of low estate;
He will satisfy the hungry with good things,
but send the rich away with nothing.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his
offspring forever, just as he promised our forefathers.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months and then returned to her own home in Nazareth. (*Luke 1:39-56*)

JOHN THE BAPTIST IS BORN

The time for Elizabeth to have her baby arrived, and she gave birth to a son. When her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown such faithful love to her in removing her barrenness, they broke out in rejoicing with her.

Eight days later, as was the Jewish custom, they came to attend the circumcision ceremony. They were expecting his parents to name the boy after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up, “No,” she said, “His name is to be John.”

“But there is no one among your relatives that goes by that name,” they objected.

So, by making various hand signals, they asked the baby’s father what he would name him. Zechariah motioned for a wax tablet and, to the surprise of everyone, wrote, “John is his name.” At that very moment Zechariah’s mouth was opened, his tongue was set free, and he began to speak, praising God. All the neighbors were filled with awe, and the entire affair was discussed everywhere in the hill country of Judea. Everyone who heard about it took it to heart wondering, “What then will this child turn out to be?” For it is clear that the hand of the Lord is on him. Then his father, Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke this prophecy:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has come to his people and set them free.
He has raised up a mighty Savior from the house of
his servant David, just as he promised long ago
through his holy prophets.
His purpose was to save us from our enemies,
and from all who hate us.
He has shown us the mercy he promised to our
ancestors.

He has kept his sacred covenant—the covenant he
swore with an oath to Abraham our father.
We have been delivered from our enemies.
Therefore, free from fear, we can serve him all the days
of our life in a holy and upright manner.
And you, my little child, will be called the prophet of
the Most High.
You will go ahead of the Lord to prepare the way for
him.
You will tell his people about salvation, about how they
can have their sins forgiven.
Because God is both merciful and tender, the bright
dawn of salvation is about to break upon us,
giving light to those who live in the dark shadow
of death, and guiding our feet into the way of
peace.

And the child continued to grow and became strong in body
and spirit. He lived in the desert until the day he made his public
appearance in Israel. (*Luke 1:57–80*)

MY FAMILY LINE ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

My family line begins with the patriarch Abraham and runs
through King David. Here it is:

The son of Abraham was Isaac. Then came Jacob, followed by
Judah and his brothers. Judah and his wife Tamar had Perez and
Zerah, the latter being the father of Hezron whose son was Ram.

Ram's son was Amminadab, who became the father of Nashon
and grandfather of Salmon. The son of Salmon and Rahad his wife
was Boaz, whose wife Ruth had a boy named Obed. Obed was the
father of Jesse, and Jesse was the father of David who became king.

After David came Solomon, by the wife of Uriah, then Rehoboam, Abijah, Asaph, Jehoshaphat, Joram, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh, Amos, Josiah, Jechoniah, and his brothers. At this point in time, the Israelites were sent into exile in Babylon.

After the exile Jechoniah had a son named Shealtiel who was the father of Zerubbabel. From there on we have Abiud, then Eliakim, Azor, Zadok, Achim, Eliud, Eleazar, Matthan, and finally, Jacob, the father of Joseph, husband of Mary. Mary gave birth to Jesus who is called the Christ.

So there are fourteen generations between Abraham and David, fourteen from David to the deportation to Babylon, and fourteen from there to my birth. (*Matt. 1:1-17*)