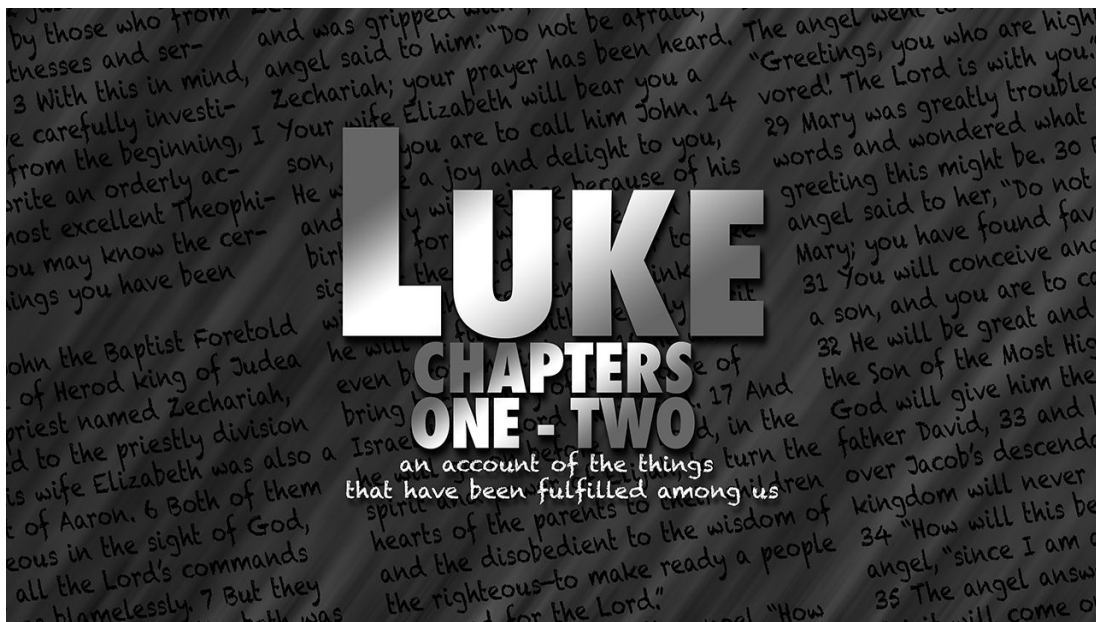




*"The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."*





*Leader's Book - Term 4 2016*

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# About Growth Groups

## Do you remember the Campbelltown Anglican Churches' Vision Statement?

We want to be ...

***"a growing Christian community  
devoted to  
maturing in Jesus for the glory of God."***

We don't need to grow as a Christian alone. The reality is that doing it alone is both hard and slow. God has given us 'everything we need for life and for godliness.' (2 Peter 1:3) One of those things is our church community. Growth Groups provide an excellent opportunity to help each other to live out grace and apply our knowledge of Jesus. We want to be a community devoted to knowing Jesus and trusting him.

## What that looks like in Growth Groups

**Magnification** - We are made to glorify God. As we read the bible together, allow yourself to be amazed by God. Share with one another what you have learned about the greatness of God. And let your prayers celebrate his goodness, his power and his care.

**Membership** - We are designed to love one another. So, love one another. Get to know one another and listen out for when someone needs encouragement or help. Do your bit to make your group a family in Christ. Also, who else can you invite from your congregation to join your group?

**Maturity** - Our goal is to grow in Christ-likeness. Reading the bible together is not the ends of our meetings. The plan is to mature. Be ready to be rebuked and corrected from the Scriptures as well as being taught and encouraged. Pray for one another's maturity and celebrate with each other when you see God growing people up.

**Ministry** - God has saved us to serve. Work out how you can help your Growth Group leader to create a great group experience. Look

out for what talents others have in the group and encourage them to use their gifts for the group and for the church. Can your group do something together in serving the church community?

**Mission** - God's mission is our mission. Pray together about your opportunities and efforts to speak God's word into your world. Pray for the church's mission endeavours and pray for missionaries overseas together. Could your group do something together to reach the community in which you live?

## Each group is different

One way to help Growth Group work for everyone is to make sure that we are all on the same page. This can be achieved by listening to each other's expectations, discussing them and agreeing to a set of expectations as a group. It is helpful to do this once or twice each year as your group changes and morphs over time.

What are your expectations of *this* group? Reflect on the following three questions and then spend some time listening to one another's ideas. What expectations can you come up with as a group?

1. From the leaders in this group I expect...

***Some things to consider in your discussion together might include:***

2. From the others in this group I expect...

*start and finish times;  
preparation;  
discussion; prayer;  
growth/future; if you  
can't make it;  
confidentiality; contact  
method and details*

3. From myself in this group I expect...



## People in my group

Name	Things to remember about this person

# Galatians 5:16-25

## ***The Spirit and Growth***

*'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.' Galatians 5:22-23a*

### **Context**

The gospel message must include information about the Holy Spirit. Remember that Jesus told Nicodemus, a Jewish expert in the law, he must be born again of water and the Spirit if he wanted to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5). Nothing that this Pharisee had done in all his life was enough to bring him to the kingdom. Only the work of the Spirit could do that. Jesus then said that only those who believe in the Son may have eternal life (John 3:15). So, the work of the Spirit is to open the eyes of people to see Jesus as King and Saviour. The Holy Spirit kicks off the Christian life.

In our previous two sermons, we have heard who the Holy Spirit is (God) and that the Holy Spirit is the giver of life. In today's study, we will use Galatians 5:16-26 to examine the Spirit's work in our Christian growth.

The New Testament book of Galatians is a letter by Paul the Apostle to the Christian church in Galatia. Having received the gospel of Jesus Christ, they were now returning to old religious practices (Galatians 6:12). For example, they were observing special religious days and seasons (Galatians 4:10-11), and reintroducing circumcision (Galatians 5:12). Paul was worried for them that they would forfeit their eternal life because of false teachers persuading them to focus on observing the law. In Galatians 5, he explains how living free from the law does not equal free from holiness since Christians walk in step with the Spirit of God.

### **Discuss**

What are some foods that you find really hard to resist but know that you should?

# Read, Mark, Learn

## Read Galatians 5:16-25

<sup>16</sup> So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

<sup>19</sup> The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; <sup>20</sup> idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions <sup>21</sup> and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. <sup>24</sup> Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

### 1. **Re-read Verses 16-18. Why are we told 'that you are not to do whatever you want'?**

*There are two 'spirits' in conflict here: the Holy Spirit (see Galatians 3:5 to show that the Spirit is the Spirit of God) and the human spirit which is labelled as 'the flesh'.*

*Our wants are our desires and our desires will naturally be in tune with the flesh. This is in conflict with the Spirit of God. So, we aren't to simply do whatever we desire and think that is God's will but we must somehow respond to, or walk by, the Spirit of God.*

### 2. **In Verses 19-21, Paul tells us that you can easily see the flesh in action. (a) Look over the examples Paul gives in this section and discuss meanings of each of the words. (b) Is it politically correct to say that impulses people have are in conflict with God? Is it politically correct to call a sin evil? Discuss.**

*Feel free to Google different words in the list to get definitions. Note however that the NIV uses semicolons ( ; ) to helpfully show how this list is grouped into 'like' sins.*

*No, of course it's not politically correct. What we accept, as Christians, is that the world is blind to the idea of working against the flesh and instead allowing the Spirit to be their Master. It's an easier battle to simply surrender to the flesh and call evil good and even good evil. Eg, when someone stands by their 'right' to be angry and never forgive someone; or when someone who opposes same-sex marriage is called evil.*

### 3. **'Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.' According to Verses 22-25, how do we do that?**

*We need to be aware of what the Spirit is like and what he likes or desires.  
We are told to put the flesh to death so it's not so much a battle between two Masters but a mission to serve just one Master who is the Spirit.*

4. **Look at the fruit of the Spirit listed and use the following passages to explore each one.**

*You could divide the words among your group, allow some reading and thinking time and then allow each member to read their verses and give a short summary of how they help us understand the fruit of the Spirit.*

**Love** - 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a; 1 John 4:8

*Love is perhaps the best word we have to describe God.*

**Joy** - Luke 10:20; Philippians 4:4-7

*Joy is a gift to those whose names are written in heaven.*

**Peace** - Ephesians 2:14-18

*Peace is also a gift from God through reconciliation between us and God and between one another.*

**Patience** (forbearance), **kindness** - Romans 2:4; 3:25

*These demonstrate the nature of God toward sinners.*

**Goodness** - Ephesians 2:10; James 2:17-18

*Goodness is what we are saved for.*

**Faithfulness** - Hebrews 10:23; 3 John 3

*Faithfulness is to stand firm in the faith as well as to be trustworthy.*

**Gentleness** - 1 Peter 3:15

*Gentleness promotes love and graciousness to others.*

**Self-control** - Titus 2:11-12; 2 Peter 1:5-8



*Self-control is a direct response to the gospel of God (Titus 2:11-12) and the road to love (2 Peter 1:5-8)*

## Meaning

*Christian growth does not concern learning rules, nor keeping traditions, but rather listening to the Spirit of God who lives with us. Two masters are at battle within us, the flesh and the Spirit. They are in conflict with one another and cannot be friends. Feeding the impulses of the flesh works against spiritual growth and is in line with all who are excluded from the kingdom of God. Responding to the Spirit of God is what people in the kingdom do and produces Christian growth. Christian growth is about partnering with the Spirit of God.*

## Application

- **Topic A: Keeping in step with the Spirit.** This involves listening and obeying and discipline. It requires meditation over the word of God to know God and know His Spirit. Many may say that they hear the Spirit of God speak to them when they pray. Even so, how can you discern the difference between the voice of God and your own random thought or even an influence of a lying spirit? We know God by knowing his word. Talk together about how to go about this. Share your own practice of bible reading and prayer. Challenge one another to not simply read the bible but to engage with God continuously.
- **Topic B: Putting to death the deeds of the flesh.** What obvious acts of the flesh do you struggle to kill off in your life? This can be a very hard conversation to have in a group, so it may be better to talk in triplets. Pray for one another about these things and be sure to talk not only about what needs to be put to death and how, but also what life giving gifts of the Spirit do we have to combat it. Examples include prayer, love, remembering the promises of God, which bring peace and joy.
- **Topic C: Speaking words of the Spirit to one another.** Verses 24 and 25 talk about those who belong to Christ and live by the Spirit. When we are together in Growth Group and at church, what conversations can we have to encourage Spiritual growth? Consider how we steer our conversations away from things the flesh is at home with and on to content and manners in step with the Spirit.

## Prayer for the week

*Spirit of God, guide us each day to think and act as children of God and heirs to the Kingdom of God. Help us to be conscious of your presence and your desire to shape us as those who belong to Christ Jesus. Give us strength and resolution to put to death the ways of the flesh and give us love, joy and peace in Jesus' name. Amen.*

# The Spirit and Gifts

## *Now about the gifts of the Spirit...*

*'We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.' Romans 12:6*

### Context

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome, he desired to give them some spiritual gift, when and if he visited them, in order to make them strong (Romans 1:11). In 1 Corinthians Chapters 12-14, he wrote further about gifts of the Spirit. In this study, we will try and bring some clarity to what these gifts were and what we ought to desire from God. Are Christians promised to receive more gifts through the Spirit if they seek them? What is the difference between being gifted (talented) and having a Spiritual gift? We will not exhaust this topic but our aim will be to find truth from God's word so that we may share his desires and vision for Christians and the church.

### Discuss

When we describe anyone as 'gifted', what sort of things do we have in mind?

*This discussion is helping us see how we use this word (gifted) in our world. We might talk about gifted musicians, speakers, artists, thinkers, and so on. Another word in this sense is 'talented'.*

### Read, Mark, Learn

#### 1. Read Romans 1:11-13.

<sup>11</sup> I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—<sup>12</sup> that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. <sup>13</sup> I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, <sup>c</sup> that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

**This is the only time the phrase 'spiritual gift' is used in the New Testament. In the context, what does Paul have in mind when he uses this unique phrase?**

*He clearly explains himself in Verse 12 to mean that he wants to encourage them by his faith and be encouraged by them in the same way. That is, he wants to build them up by sharing the gospel and the truth with them.*

*NB: the phrase 'spiritual gift' appears to be used in 1 Corinthians 1:7 also, however, this is a translational decision as the word for 'spiritual' does not occur in the original Greek - it could and should simply read 'you do not lack any gift' - how frustrating!*

## **2. Read Romans 12:1-8.**

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

<sup>3</sup> For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. <sup>4</sup> For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. <sup>6</sup> We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; <sup>7</sup> if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; <sup>8</sup> if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

### **(a) Re-write Verses 4-6a in your own words.**

*Christians together form one body with different parts. We each have different parts to play and none should be viewed as more important than the other. The gifts we share are gifts to us from God.*

### **(b) What do you notice about the selection of gifts mentioned here?**

*They are given by God and are for building others up. All the gifts are for sharing with others for the sake of others. Prophecy according to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Serve, teach and encourage. Be generous, diligent, merciful and cheerful. These are all gifted by God to be gifted to one another!*

## **3. Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11.**

Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. <sup>2</sup> You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. <sup>3</sup> Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

<sup>4</sup> There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. <sup>5</sup> There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. <sup>6</sup> There are

different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

<sup>7</sup> Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. <sup>8</sup> To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, <sup>9</sup> to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, <sup>10</sup> to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, <sup>11</sup> and to still another the interpretation of tongues. <sup>11</sup> All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

**(a) According to Verses 1-6, what is one primary indicator that something is from the Holy Spirit?**

*If it is a gift of the Spirit of God then it will affirm that Jesus is Lord and the gifts will not promote any other Spirit or other God or other Lord. By inference then, it must be agreeable with what the Spirit has already said in the Scriptures! Whatever the service is, it will promote Jesus as Lord (not self).*

**(b) How could you summarise the message of Verses 7-11?**

*Though there are many gifts, there is one Spirit and one body. Unity is key. No matter what gift you have and exercise, the whole body is needed. See in Verses 7 and 11, how the emphasis is on **the source**, the Spirit, and **the purpose**, for the common good just as he has determined. NB: Paul is not listing everything needed in a church but rather that there are a variety of gifts and here are some. The sermon on Sunday will address issues about tongues and prophecy and such gifts that can be misunderstood.*

#### **4. Read 1 Corinthians 12:27-31.**

<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. <sup>28</sup> And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. <sup>29</sup> Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? <sup>30</sup> Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? <sup>31</sup> Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way.

**(a) What is the key message of these verses?**

*We are one body and everyone plays a different part in it. We are not all to pursue being teachers or healers. Everyone is different.*

**(b) What are we told to pursue and what does Chapter 13 describe as ultimate?**

*The order of the gifts is given in these verses. We are not to push the order too severely as if there are more important people since the gifts are for the benefit of one another but the ultimate gift is given to all and covers over all and any gift: the greatest gift is love. Love trumps all and provides the boundary for all gifts. **NB** that Chapter 14:1 describes prophecy as one gift to particularly strive for. Since prophecy describes speaking the word of God into our world, then this is something we need to see pursued in every church community. Not that everyone has it, but that every church does.*

## Meaning

*When it comes to gifts of the Spirit, we must not jump to fanciful conclusions about them but we must always look at the context of the New Testament writings about them. They are called gifts because they are manifestations of God's grace. Secondly, they are for building up the church. Thirdly, they proclaim Jesus as Lord and are to serve him. Fourthly, they work together as individual parts for the benefit of the whole. Fifthly, any gift must be exercised in faith, humility and obedience. Lastly, love trumps.*

## Application

- **Topic A: Perceiving your own gifts.** Discuss what you think your gifts may be and encourage one another with how you might exercise those gifts for the building up of the body of Christ?
- **Topic B: Encouraging others to see their gifts.** How would you respond to someone who doesn't feel involved in church and doesn't feel they have anything to offer? Use what we've read in the New Testament to shape your response.

## Prayer for the week

*Lord God, we thank you for your Spirit and your generosity toward us. Help your church to grow in love and obedience to your word. Awaken our desire to serve one another in order to bring glory to you and build one another up in love. Amen.*

# Ephesians 1:1-14; 2:11-22

## *A Study on Membership*

*'And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.'* Ephesians 2:22

### Context

Our Vision Statement is that we want to be 'A growing Christian community devoted to maturing in Jesus for the glory of God'. In this study, we will be thinking about what it means to be a Christian community. In other words, we will be focussing on 'Membership'.

In Paul's letter to the Christians living in Ephesus, he highlights the believer's corporate identity in Christ. The issue in the Church, at the time this letter was written, was the division in the Church based on religious and racial background (Jewish and Gentile believers). Paul writes to affirm the unity found in Christ. There is one body and one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. (Ephesians 4:4-6).

### Discuss

Church is a place where I feel like I belong.

*Give time to this discussion and explore why the members of your group may or may not feel they belong. Listen carefully without being defensive but also don't let negative people dominate the conversation.*

### Read, Mark, Learn

#### Read Ephesians 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:

<sup>2</sup> Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup> Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. <sup>4</sup> For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love <sup>5</sup> he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—<sup>6</sup> to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. <sup>7</sup> In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's

grace <sup>8</sup> that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, <sup>9</sup> he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, <sup>10</sup> to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

<sup>11</sup> In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, <sup>12</sup> in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. <sup>13</sup> And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, <sup>14</sup> who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

**1. Look at Verses 13-14. What do these verses tell us about how we become included in Christ, in other words, what is the membership criteria?**

*Chapter 1 raises the question of predestination and can easily go off on a tangent. Don't go down this rabbit hole for too long if it comes up. (Recommend 'Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God' JI Packer we have a few copies in the office) Encourage them to look at the verbs in verses 13 and 14 (heard, believed, marked).*

**For further discussion, look also at chapter 2:1-10.**

*Talk about God's part in giving us new life in Christ and then focus on 'grace through faith' that saves us. Later in application we will discuss other criteria churches may expect for full membership it is important to make it clear at this point that the only criteria is ~ faith in Christ.*

**2. Re-read Verses 1-12. What are the benefits of membership into God's family through Christ?**

*Try not spend too much time on this maybe tell them these verses are like looking into a treasure chest of blessings, jam packed with incredible, wonderful, beyond comprehension, goodness. You could give them a time limit to write down as many as they can or just get them to yell them out as they see them.*

## **Read Ephesians 2:11-22**

<sup>11</sup> Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)—<sup>12</sup> remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

<sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, <sup>15</sup> by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. <sup>17</sup> He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

<sup>19</sup> Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

**3. Look at Verses 11-12. What language does Paul use to highlight the difference in status a person has before and after coming to know Christ?**

*The letter is addressed to God's holy people (Christians from a Jewish and Gentile background) but in Verses 11 to 22 Paul is specifically addressing Gentile believers. The language is very strong, exclusive language, there is a definite distinction between those who are included and those who aren't based on the promises made to the Jews. A vertical barrier stood in the temple precincts in Jerusalem preventing Gentiles from proceeding from the outer courts (the court of the Gentiles) into the inner courts. Notices were attached to the barrier at intervals in Greek and Latin warning Gentiles not to proceed farther on pain of death. You may want to ask why Paul uses such strong language and suggest that there are no grey areas when it comes to who is a member and who is not as far as God is concerned.*

**4. What words indicate that Gentile believers have full membership into God's household?**

*No longer foreigners, strangers, fellow citizens, God's people, members of his household, in him the whole building, joined together, you too, built together.*

**5. 'For he himself is our peace...' (Verse 14a) Looking more closely at Verses 14-18, what do you think those words in Verse 14a mean?**

*Draw out the twofold sense of peace ~ peace with God and peace with fellow believers. Focus on the little word 'is' and the difference in saying he 'made' peace or 'proclaimed' peace.*

**6. Trace the movement through these verses of being without God to being built together into a holy temple where God lives. Can you describe or draw what that looks like?**



*These verses fall nicely into three sections 11-12, 13-18, 19-22. Draw out the strong contrast of being separated, without hope, without God, far away. Then look at all that Christ has done to bring peace, destroy separation, and create one, new humanity out of two. And finally describe the household being built, what is built on, what is it becoming, who lives there.*

## Meaning

*The Jews were God's chosen people, given promises of land/ descendants/ blessing, rescued out of slavery, bound to God in covenant relationship, given the law and spoken to by the prophets. They were a people belonging to God, with all the privileges and blessings that went along with being members of God's people.*

*Incredibly, as Paul points out in Ephesians, God also chose Gentiles (non-Jewish people) before the creation of the world, to be full members of his family with all the benefits and blessing only members can enjoy. The key truth found in Ephesians is that membership is only found in Jesus regardless of background. Through Christ and Christ alone we have access to the Father. We may be members of the Anglican Church that meets in Campbelltown/Airds but we are called to be first and foremost members of Christ's body, fellow citizens, people of the promise, members of God's household.*

## Application

- **Topic A: Membership criteria.** Think about the spoken or unspoken message you have heard from churches you have been involved in, what have you perceived to be the criteria (if any) for membership into that church or subgroup within the church? Should churches have a membership criterion? What do you think is reasonable or unreasonable to expect from members of the church? How has this study shaped your thinking about membership?
- **Topic B: Dividing walls.** Paul was speaking specifically about the dividing wall between Jew and Gentiles. What walls of division do we consciously or subconsciously put up when it comes to fellow members of God's household that we gather with week by week? Why do you think that happens? How can we work towards breaking those walls down?
- **Topic C: Belonging.** Where in your life do you feel the greatest sense of belonging? How can the knowledge of who we are in Christ develop a great sense of belonging when we gather with other members of the body? How can we encourage and foster the same sense of belonging we may feel with family or friends or colleagues or sporting team at church?

## Prayer for the week

There are two great household of God prayers to pray for fellow members of Christ's body ~ Ephesians 1:15-23 and 3:14-21.

*God of grace and peace,*

*Thank you that when we still far from you, separated from your family, without right relationship with you as our God and Father, you accomplished all things in Christ to bring us into your eternal household. Thankyou that full membership is granted to all who put their hope in Jesus. Please help us recognise all the benefits we have as members of your family in Christ, give us a true sense of belonging and please help us to rejoice in and love our fellow citizens in Christ. Make us aware, we pray, of those struggling to connect and feel they belong and enable us to love, strengthen and encourage them in the power you provide by your Spirit that dwell within. Amen*

*(For further study ~read Ephesians 4:1-2 then 4:17 to 5:2.)*

*Paul urges believers to live a life worthy of their calling then goes on to speak about what that looks like relationally in the body of Christ (in a growing Christian community). List the things we are to be and the things we are not to be towards each other. Perhaps you could draw two gingerbread shaped people and fill each with words pertaining to a life reflecting that we belong to Christ and each other and a life disconnected from Christ and his people.*

## **Who is Luke?**

Although no signature is found by the author, the third gospel has been credited to Luke, the companion to Paul, without objection from the very beginning. He is clearly the same author who wrote the book of Acts (compare the opening verses of each book). Luke was present with Paul during parts of his journeys (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16) and yet is never named. The mention of him in Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11 and Philemon 24 makes him the prime suspect for being with Paul in Acts. Lastly, authorship was credited to Luke as early as the 2nd century AD by the historian Eusebius.

Luke was a doctor (see Colossians 4:14) and according to Eusebius, he was a Gentile from Antioch. He declared at the beginning of his book that he would write with great precision and study into the matter and this is evident in his writing. See Luke 3:1-2 for an example of the historic detail included in his writing.

## **When was this book written?**

The most likely answer to this question is around A.D. 62. The events written in the book of Acts ends at around this year and it is clear that Luke and Acts were written as a two part series or two volumes of a single piece. The Gospel may have been concluded as early as A.D. 60. Luke makes no mention of Paul's death which occurred around A.D. 64-67 nor does he make mention of the conflict from Nero in A.D. 65. Of course, not all scholars agree with this dating, but it seems the most credible as long as we credit Jesus as being able to predict the fall of Jerusalem in Luke 21:20-24.

This dating places Luke's completed research around 30 years after the ascension of Jesus and yet very much amidst the eyewitnesses of all that took place concerning Jesus and the unfolding fulfilment of God's salvation to the world.

## **Only two chapters?**

It is such a precious thing to travel slowly over familiar territory. When we have read and heard the gospels enough, it is fabulous to take time to rediscover gems in the detail. The book of Luke contains many events in the life of Jesus that are not recorded by the other gospel writers and the first two chapters are a good example of this. What better way to lead into Christmas than to unpack the birth and early years of Jesus the Nazarene - who 'came to seek and to save the lost' (Luke 19:10).

## Luke 1:1-4

# *Knowing for certain*

*'So that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.'* Luke 1:4

## Context

Luke writes about the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. His book is one of the gospels and helps to open the pages of the New Testament. It is written in such a way that while the reader is made aware that there is a backstory to this book, it stands alone as the story of how God brought salvation to mankind.

Luke writes about a time in history which did not go unnoticed by many (see Luke 24:18). It was a period in Israel's history, about 400 years after the final words of the Old Testament were penned. Although the Jews had returned from Exile, they were currently under the reign of Rome rather than having a Jew for their king. Centuries have passed without a word from Yahweh. Then Jesus came.

## Discuss

What events have occurred in our world that have had people writing or social media 'exploding' about them?

## Read, Mark, Learn

### Read Luke 1:1-4

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, <sup>2</sup> just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. <sup>3</sup> With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

- 1. Verse 1 states that 'many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled.' Discuss who the 'many' might be. How was Luke's purpose for recording the history of his time different to theirs?**

- *The 'many' could include Matthew, Mark and John.*
  - *'Many' could include those who were recording the historical events of the time and their impact on people.*
  - *Luke is establishing his credentials and reasons for writing.*
  - *Luke's personal context, the historical context of the Jews and the context of Jesus are all factors in why he writes this account. It*
2. **Re-read Verses 1-2. Why is it important to tell and preserve events that happened in Luke's historical context? Who might the 'servants of the word' be?**
    - *The events reveal how God's word has been fulfilled in Jesus.*
    - *The servants could be the eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection; his disciples; believers in God and his word - those who saw and believed.*
  3. **Look at Verse 3. Why does Luke write an orderly account to Theophilus?**
    - *To testify to the truth and share his expertise and his access to the truth of his account.*
    - *To reach out to all who love God - Theophilus was clearly someone who loved God.*
    - *So he can present the account in an orderly and well thought out manner and thus share God's truth.*
  4. **Re-read Verse 4. Why is his account for Theophilus still vital for people in our modern world?**
    - *Luke's purpose is to give us supported and researched evidence that preserves the facts and encourages those who have faith because his account supports all that we already know and have been taught about Jesus.*

## Meaning

*Luke is determined to put together a well researched paper concerning the fulfillment of God's word which has happened in his own history. He aims to give us an account that we can trust since it agrees with all the eyewitnesses and multitude of accounts floating around at the time. Something big has happened in the world and Luke aims to preserve it for all to read and be assured of its accuracy.*

## Application

- **Topic A: Are you certain of the evidence behind the Christian faith?** What could you do to investigate the claims of Jesus and his disciples? You could sign up for an 'Exploring Christ' course. You could read a book such as 'More than a Carpenter' by Josh and Sean McDowell.
- **Topic B: Being confident of the bible.** How would you explain to your friends and family that the bible is trustworthy and true?
- **Topic C: God's fulfilled promises.** Discuss the promises of God which have been fulfilled in Christ and those which are yet to be fulfilled. How would the world be different if we didn't have books like Luke or the rest of the New Testament? Give thanks in prayer for these things.

## Prayer for the week

*Father, thank you for giving us your word and a multitude of witnesses to your word being fulfilled. Help us in our unbelief to know the certainty of the things that we have*

*been taught. Bless us through these studies so that we may love you more and see your promises clearly. Amen.*

## Luke 1:5-25

# ***The Lord has done this for me!***

*'The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.'* Luke 1:25

## **Context**

Luke has declared his intentions for writing in Verses 1-4. He has researched carefully and is determined to write a trustworthy account of all that had been fulfilled in his time. The reader, namely Theophilus, is poised ready to hear about God fulfilling his word. The beginning of Luke's orderly account opens up now with an elderly priest being promised a child. This sounds like the right place to begin the story of the Messiah! A priest, of course! And elderly like Abraham! What a great way to introduce the story of Jesus and his special birth! But these are not the parents of Jesus. Luke's detailed account begins with the birth of John the Baptist - another special birth.

## **Discuss**

Reflect on a story that has had a lasting impact on you. Share what it is about the story that touched, challenged, changed or shaped you.

## **Read, Mark, Learn**

### **Read Luke 1:5-25**

<sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. <sup>7</sup> But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

<sup>8</sup> Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup> And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

<sup>11</sup> Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. <sup>13</sup> 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 call him John. <sup>14</sup> He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup> 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 before he is born. <sup>16</sup> He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

<sup>18</sup> Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

<sup>19</sup> The angel said to him, “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. <sup>20</sup> 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 appointed time.”

<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. <sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> When his time of service was completed, he returned home. <sup>24</sup> After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. <sup>25</sup> “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.”

**1. Verses 5-7 introduces us to Zechariah and Elizabeth’s story. What do we learn about them? Discuss what ‘righteous in the sight of God’ looked like.**

*We learn that they were righteous (Verse 6), old and childless (Verse 7), he belonged to the priestly division of Abijah and she was a descendent of Aaron (Verse 7). God is going to use another miraculous birth to highlight his salvation plans.*

*Righteous meant obeying and trusting God, displaying grace regardless of the burden and suffering Zechariah and Elizabeth endured (being childless.)*

**2. Re-read Verses 8-17 and discuss what happens in this section. How does this show God’s will and calling?**



*We see Zechariah going about his normal day unaware that God is about to answer his prayers.*

*Zechariah goes off to work at the temple (Verse 8); he is chosen by lot to go into the temple and burn incense (Verse 9); Gabriel appears (Verse 11) and reassures him that his prayer has been heard (Verse 13); people are outside praying and worshipping waiting for Zechariah to come out of the temple (Verse 10); Gabriel explains that Zechariah and Elizabeth will have a son named John (Verse 13); he will be a joy and delight (Verse 14); his name is set, his salvation is set, his calling is set (Verse 15).*

*God has heard Zechariah's prayer and is answering his prayer so his greater plan for salvation can occur. His plan (Verse 16-17) forms the basis of John's ministry - repent and believe for the kingdom of God is at hand - Jesus, the King and Messiah.*

**3. Look at Verses 18-20. Zechariah responds to Gabriel with doubt, he wanted assurance because he was old and childless (Verse 18). How does Gabriel respond to Zechariah (Verses 19-20)?**

*Gabriel makes a number of statements of fact (Verse 19) 'I am ... I stand..... I have been sent..... To tell this good news. And now you will be silent.... Appointed time.' These statements are used to both assure Zechariah - all the 'I' statements, and rebuke him - 'and now you' statement. This points the reader to the fact that good news regarding God's plan for salvation has been delivered, in God's timing.*

**4. Re-read Verses 21-25. Stories often use 'meanwhile' to draw the reader back to the bigger picture. Discuss why the worshippers and Elizabeth knew Zechariah had seen a vision in the temple? Why is Verse 25 so important in this narrative and for us?**

*Verse 21 has the worshippers wondering what is taking Zechariah so long; Verse 22 they realise that he has seen a vision because he is unable to communicate verbally; Verse 23 He is unable to communicate with Elizabeth. This evidence all pointed to the fact that something had taken place in the temple - he was unable to speak until the birth of John.*

*Verse 25 is so important because Elizabeth is praising God for being gracious to them and blessing them with a child after such a long time of prayer and waiting. It shows us God's favour, His perfect timing for answering prayer, His grace in showing favour to those who are not perfect.*

## Meaning

*When the good news is proclaimed, who will believe? Zechariah saw the angel and heard his message plainly - yet he doubted. The worshippers outside the temple did not see the angel but they believed because of the evidence surrounding the visit. Luke's book is about God's promises fulfilled in Jesus. Will people see the evidence and realise what has happened? Or will God perform such great signs and wonders and yet still people not believe? Jesus has come and left evidence of the resurrection. Luke gives us a short story of how some shall doubt even though they see and yet some will believe simply because of the evidence.*

## Application

- **Topic A: Learn how to read a biblical narrative** and learn what the key message is. The bulk of the bible is made up of stories written down for a purpose. Many approaches have been taken in the church history to understand the meaning and interpretation but skillful analysis can easily reveal what the author always intended for his account.

- **Topic B: God's timing in everything is crucial** and our part is to pray and trust. Zechariah was a great prayer but he was slow to believe. What can we do to help ourselves and one another to be patient with God and to stop doubting? Hint, remembering what it is we believe and why we believe it.
- **Topic C: Bringing people back to God.** We can continue to live in the power and spirit of Elijah by prompting our circle of influence to reconsider God and his justice and mercy. Salvation comes to those who put their trust in Jesus. Trust comes after the danger is spoken about and the solution is offered. While this passage doesn't explicitly tell us to be John the Baptists, we know the good news and we have the Holy Spirit within and we have been charged by Jesus to go and make disciples.

## Prayer for the week

*Heavenly Father, hear us as we pray and help us to believe that you have sent your Son into the world to save sinners. Thank you for the good news, for the Holy Spirit, and for your great love for us. Help us to bear witness to this world so that more may believe. Amen.*

## Luke 1:26-38

# ***For no word from God will ever fail.***

*'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'*

*Luke 1:28*

## **Context**

Luke has opened his well investigated and thought out history book with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth being visited by the angel Gabriel and told that they will have a baby in their old age. Elizabeth lived in seclusion for the first five months of her pregnancy. This story commences in her sixth month.

Further biblical context includes the fact that Elizabeth is an Israelite and therefore of the nation that received promises from the God of the universe. In Genesis 3:15, we are promised a child of Eve who would crush Satan's head. Genesis 49:10 promised that someone from the line of Judah would someday come to rule over all the nations. Likewise, 2 Samuel 7 declared that the throne of David (and his offspring) would be established forever. Finally, Isaiah 7:14 predicts that the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God with us').

The scene is set and the history predicted but will God fulfill his promises? Instead of childbirth, we have seen evidence of barrenness. Instead of the strong line of Judah and the unstoppable heirs of David, Israel has a foreign king named Herod. And as for the virgin? A search through the Old Testament shows us that the virgin is actually Israel (Isaiah 37:22; Jeremiah 14:17; 18:13) and one of the final prophets declared 'Fallen is Virgin Israel, never to rise again' (Amos 5:2).

## **Discuss**

Think of a time when you have received a gift you were not expecting. How did that make you feel? How did you respond?

## **Read, Mark, Learn**

### **Read Luke 1:26-38**

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named

Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

<sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

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

<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on 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. <sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail."

<sup>38</sup> "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

**1. Once again Gabriel is sent to share God's message of a miraculous birth. Explain why God chose Mary to carry his son.**

*Mary is God's servant (Verse 28); she is marrying a descendent of David which fulfills God's plan (Verse 27); she found favour with God by living a godly life (Verse 30); she is related to Elizabeth - another servant of God who was also about to have a miracle birth.*

**2. Discuss what Gabriel says about Jesus.**

*Mary, a virgin, will conceive and give birth to a son (Verse 31); His name will be Jesus; He will be great (Verse 32); He will be called Son of the Most High (Verse 32); He will have the throne of David because of God (Verse 32); He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever (Verse 33); His kingdom will never end (Verse 33).*

**3. Re-read Verses 33- 37. In Verse 34, Mary asks 'How will this be since I am a virgin?' How does Gabriel reassure her?**

*Gabriel explains that the Holy Spirit and the Most High (God) would bring into human existence the Son of God and watch over her (Verse 35); He points her in the direction of a human - Elizabeth - who understands personally God's miracles; He reassures her with Verse 37 'For no word from God will ever fail' - God's words and promises never fail.*

**4. How is Mary's response in Verse 38 an example for us today?**

*God has spoken to Mary and she listened and obeyed. He gave her words of hope, salvation, peace and justice and she responded in faith, thankfulness and prayerfulness. We need to adopt her model in our lives.*

## Meaning

*God's promises are sure. He has shown grace on us by sending his Son whom he promised from ages past. As the song goes, 'this is his only plan'. All of Scripture speaks of the coming of Jesus. It wasn't until after he came that the pieces were seen in the light. The virgin predicted in Isaiah was no more than a metaphor for the nation of Israel, but we see that it was also a promise of a young girl in Nazareth to give birth to Jesus, the saviour of the world.*

## Application

- **Topic A: Remembering the promises of God.** List the promises of God which you hold dearly. Share how you reflect on them to grow your faith. Are there any of those which you struggle to believe?
- **Topic B: Being God's humble servant.** Knowing our place before God is an essential element to the Christian Faith. Are there ways you struggle to see yourself as God's humble servant? Do you treat Jesus as your King? How does or should this be evident in your life?
- **Topic C: Prayer.** Pray through the passage, bringing to mind all the ways God has blessed this world and promises to in the future.

## Prayer for the week

*Lord God, may you look on us with favour, generous grace, and love. May we respond in faith, love and obedience. Amen.*

## Luke 1:39-56

### *Why am I so favoured?*

*'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.'* Luke 1:46

### Context

Elizabeth, a Jewish priest's wife, has become pregnant in her old age after a lifetime of barrenness. Mary, her cousin, has been promised to bear a son, not by human means but through the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth's son will be named John and Mary's child will be named Jesus. The former will prepare the world for the coming of the latter. Jesus will be the promised king of Israel whose throne will endure forever.

When Elizabeth became pregnant, she began to live in seclusion and five months later, Mary was given her news from God. While Elizabeth's husband doubted the new he received from God, Mary submitted to the news and believed that God would do it.

### Discuss

How do you usually react to big news?

### Read, Mark, Learn

#### Read Luke 1:39-56

<sup>39</sup> At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, <sup>40</sup> where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup> In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! <sup>43</sup> But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup> for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup> His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup> He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

<sup>52</sup> He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.

<sup>53</sup> He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.

<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful

<sup>55</sup> to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
just as he promised our ancestors.”

<sup>56</sup> Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

**1. Look through the passage again together slowly, highlighting the key words or sentences about Mary and Elizabeth’s reactions to the news they have received.**

- *You may like to break into small groups of 2 or 3 for this question, then discuss as a whole group.*
- *Verse 39 feels very rushed – Mary got ready, hurried, entered, greeted. Mary heard the news and acted immediately. She is rushing in the expectation that she will find this news to be true and that Elizabeth will already be pregnant.*
- *Verse 41 – even Elizabeth’s baby reacts to the presence of Mary in light of the news they have received. Gabriel told Zechariah that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit even in the womb (1:15). Here we have the evidence that the Spirit of God was igniting the emotions of the baby when he was in the presence of Jesus’ mother.*
- *Verse 42 – Elizabeth exclaims loudly. Shows her obvious emotion and excitement.*
- *Verses 42-44 – Elizabeth called Mary blessed. Elizabeth considers herself ‘favoured’ since Mary the mother of her Lord has come to visit. Her reaction shows she believes the news.*
- *Verse 45 – Elizabeth can see that Mary clearly believes the word that the angel has spoken to her – hence she says that Mary is blessed for believing the Lord’s promises.*
- *Verse 46 – In response to the news, Mary glorifies the Lord and rejoices in him.*

**2. Why does Elizabeth call Mary ‘blessed’ (Verse 42) and also call herself ‘favoured’ (Verse 43)? Where is Elizabeth’s joy founded?**

- *She calls Elizabeth blessed because she has the amazing privilege to be the mother of God's Messiah.*
- *Knowing that Mary will bear the Messiah makes Elizabeth feel that it is a big privilege even to have Mary standing in front of her, hence she considers herself favoured. This echoes forward to John's adult ministry - "...one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie" (Luke 3:16).*
- *Elizabeth is ultimately rejoicing in God, not Mary, because she is rejoicing that God has finally sent the promised messiah (whom Mary now bears). It is the greatness of Mary's baby not the greatness of Mary herself, that she finds overwhelming.*

### **3. Who does Mary see is responsible for her joy?**

- *Verse 46-47 her soul and spirit glorify and rejoice in God - seems very deeply felt!*
- *Verse 48 - She calls herself a humble servant.*
- *Verse 49 - she recognises that it's the mighty one who has done great things for her (not her doing great things for God).*

### **4. Look at Verses 50-55 and list the characteristics of God in which Mary rejoices. How are they related to the sending of the Messiah?**

- *Verse 50 - merciful to those who fear him / Verse 54 merciful to Israel. God's glory is not that he stands with the strong but that he is merciful to the lowly. Especially shown through sending Jesus - God's ultimate display of mercy where people don't get what they deserve because of Jesus' death in their place.*
- *Verse 51 - he is powerful, performing mighty deeds - through Jesus, God deals with people's sin - a most powerful deed.*
- *Verses 51 - 53 - the proud / rulers/ rich are scattered / go hungry / are brought down, but the hungry and humble he fills up and lifts up. Mary was a poor girl with nothing worldly to offer and yet God has blessed her with the honour of carrying Jesus to birth. Ultimately seen as through Jesus we who are enemies of God, spiritually dead, without hope, are brought near to him again, and lifted up as we are now called people of his family.*
- *Verse 55 - he keeps his promises to Abraham. Jesus is the ultimate fulfilment of all God's promises*

## **Meaning**

*Mary and Elizabeth responded with uncontained joy, and thankfulness to God, along with humility that he had chosen to use them for his purposes. Mary was blessed to be carrying the Saviour. Elizabeth was blessed to be in the presence of the Saviour. Israel was blessed to be the recipients of the child of God. Now who are we that we should be shown favour by God? There are no riches, or gifts, power or promises big enough to repay the generosity and blessings of God. All Christians who fear the Lord and humble themselves before God receive grace through the promises of God fulfilled in Jesus. Blessed are those who have believed that God will and has fulfilled his promises.*

## **Application**

- **Topic A: Christian joy.** Elizabeth and Mary were sincerely delighted and humbled to receive this big news, and they truly believed it. What makes it hard for us as Christians to react with this same level of excitement when



we hear about God's promises being kept through Jesus. How could we cultivate the same kind of reaction as Mary and Elizabeth?

- **Topic B: Sharing the deep relationship with God.** The relationship we have with God runs deep. It is our spirit or inmost thoughts which God reads and it is our spirit that yearns to know him and be pleased with him. Mary glorified the Lord with her spirit by reflecting on all that God has done. Be mindful of all that God has done for you, your group, your Christian community and for the salvation of all Christians. Sharing stories of God's goodness to you personally can help one another rejoice in him.
- **Topic C: Praying through scripture.** Pray through Mary's song by taking each phrase and speaking to God about them in your own words.

## Prayer for the week

*Father, we praise you for all that you have done and ask that you would create in us a spirit of thankfulness. Amen.*

## **Luke 1:57-80**

# ***The Lord has come to his people and redeemed them***

*'His name is John' Luke 1:63*

## **Context**

Luke has been interested in the great detail and backstory of the birth of Jesus. The angel, Gabriel first came to an old priest named Zechariah and told him his wife, Elizabeth, would have a baby to be named John. Then Elizabeth's cousin Mary was visited by the same angel to be told that she will give birth to the Christ to be named Jesus. When the two miracle mothers got together there was crying and praising God, and Mary spoke poetically about God's mercy in remembering his promises to Israel.

We come now to the birth episode of John which also contains a prophecy by Zechariah. He had been made silent because of his unbelief. Now his mouth will be opened with inspiration from the Holy Spirit.

## **Discuss**

A person's word needs to be proven true with the smaller things before you can trust their word with the bigger things.

## **Read, Mark, Learn**

### **Read Luke 1:57-80**

<sup>57</sup> When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. <sup>58</sup> Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

<sup>59</sup> On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, <sup>60</sup> but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."

<sup>61</sup> They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."

<sup>62</sup> Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. <sup>63</sup> He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote,

"His name is John." <sup>64</sup> Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. <sup>65</sup> All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. <sup>66</sup> Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

## **Zechariah's Song**

<sup>67</sup> His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

<sup>68</sup> "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,  
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

<sup>69</sup> He has raised up a horn <sup>z</sup> of salvation for us  
in the house of his servant David

<sup>70</sup> (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

<sup>71</sup> salvation from our enemies  
and from the hand of all who hate us—

<sup>72</sup> to show mercy to our ancestors  
and to remember his holy covenant,

<sup>73</sup> the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

<sup>74</sup> to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,  
and to enable us to serve him without fear

<sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

<sup>76</sup> And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

<sup>77</sup> to give his people the knowledge of salvation  
through the forgiveness of their sins,

<sup>78</sup> because of the tender mercy of our God,  
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

<sup>79</sup> to shine on those living in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the path of peace."

<sup>80</sup> And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

### **1. Looking back over Verse 57-66, what parts of this story link back to the narrative so far? What do all these connections tell us as readers?**

- *Verse 57 Elizabeth having her baby - prophesied 1:13*
- *Verse 58 - neighbors heard the Lord had showed her mercy - this was the key aspect of God's character that Mary (1:25) and Elizabeth (1:49) praised So what Mary and Elizabeth have seen of the Lord's character is now being seen by others.*
- *Verse 63 - the naming of John - commanded in 1:13*
- *Verse 64 - Zechariah being able to speak again - angel said in 1:20 that he would be not able to speak until all this happened. Now it has happened and he speaks again.*

*All these connections tell us that everything is happening exactly as was prophesied by the angel.*

**2. How do the neighbors react to these events? What are their expectations for John?**

- *Verse 58 - Neighbours share Elizabeth's joy when she falls pregnant*
- *Verse 65 - neighbours are filled with awe news spread quickly*
- *Verses 65-66 - Neighbours have great expectations of John though are not sure precisely what he will do. But they know God's hand is with him*

**3. How does Zechariah react to these events? What are his expectations of John and why does he have them?**

- *Verse 63 - immediately he speaks, praising God , then prophesies*
- *Verses 76-79 - John will be prophet of God, preparing the way for the Lord's arrival by teaching them about salvation and forgiveness. He will prepare people currently living in the shadow of death, to receive the light/sun from heaven*
- *Zechariah knows this from the angel's words in 1:14-17. Also because he is now filled with the spirit (vs67) and so has a more direct revelation from God about the role of the 2 babies we have been hearing about.*

**4. What else is Zechariah expecting to happen soon? Do you think Zechariah has a very 'Old Testament' view of what it is this person will do?**

- *Zechariah is also expecting the Messiah to come soon! Verses 68-75*
- *Verses 68 - 70 contain words like "redeemed" and "salvation" which embrace the New Testament proclamation of why Jesus came - to save people from their sins.*
- *Verses 71 - 75 - very Old Testament flavour where the expectation of the Messiah is that he will help Israel to regain power and peace among the nations - no longer in fear of others but free to serve Yahweh unhindered. This saviour seems to be a conqueror for the favour of Abraham's descendants. There is no conflict, however, since there is no such conflict between the Old and New Testament. Zechariah uses language that he understands as fulfillment to the promises made to Abraham and yet they are true also of our Lord and Saviour. He did bring grace and peace from God to the true people of Israel. All who stand opposed to God's people are promised to be dealt with in judgement while those who run to the redeemer are saved from sin and death. The greatest enemy to be destroyed is death itself.*

**5. How and why has Zechariah's attitude toward God's word changed from when we first met him earlier in the chapter?**

*Zechariah has changed from a man who heard the word of the Lord but didn't believe, to someone who has seen the Lord's word about John come true (something which seemed unbelievable), and so now eagerly expects the Lord's word about the Messiah (something even more unbelievable) to also be fulfilled.*

## Meaning

*Knowledge about salvation and confidence in God's mercy are key to the kingdom of God. Zechariah appears now to have no doubt about what is happening. What he proclaims now is that God has come to bring salvation and his son John will prepare the way by reminding everyone of God's promises and the need to desire holiness and righteousness. God continues to fulfill his word and Luke continues to underscore the real life events of his salvation plan.*

## Application

- **Topic A: Personal faith.** Are there aspects of God's promises that you find difficult to believe without seeing them with your own eyes? Zechariah had the birth of John as an impetus for belief, but we have Jesus, risen from the dead, as the ultimate proof that God's word is true and that he keeps his promises. How might our knowledge of Jesus, and looking at him, give us greater confidence in the promises of God?
- **Topic B: Our world changed by Jesus.** List all the promises declared by Zechariah in Verses 67-79. Discuss how they are a reality now and how John and Jesus have changed the world that we know. Which realities do you take for granted and which do you think are still to be fulfilled?
- **Topic C: Continuity between the Old and New Testaments.** Discuss the connections between the Old Testament and the New. Some in your group may be very familiar with how the Old and New Testaments complement one another. How would you explain the relationship between the two to an outsider?
- **Topic D: Turn to prayer.** Pray through Zechariah's prophecy in your group to simply praise God for his redemption, salvation and light shone into this dark world.

## Prayer for the week

*Lord and God, thank you for coming into this dark world to show us your truth. Thankyou that you have been faithful to all your promises. We praise you for Jesus and we thank you for John and Zechariah who prepared the way for your Son. Help us to speak of your salvation and love so that we may guide others to the path of peace. Amen.*

## Luke 2:1-7

# ***The Time Came for the Baby to be Born***

*'She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger' Luke 1:7*

## **Context**

Luke Chapter 1 describes the backdrop to the coming of Jesus into this world. It contains plenty of Old Testament fulfillment comments, priests and descendants of David, an angel and two great prophecies - but no Messiah. Mary was promised to be the mother of Jesus. She is a young Jewish girl living in an unimportant town in Galilee. She is betrothed to a man named Joseph. Mary accepted this privilege by saying that she is the Lord's humble servant.

Chapter 1 concluded with Zechariah's prophecy of the Messiah. He will come from the house of David, to save Israel from her enemies. He will be a rising sun from heaven to shine on this dark world and make clear the path of peace.

## **Discuss**

Consider how Australians feel about the Government requesting that they fill in a Census from the comfort of their own homes every four years.

## **Read, Mark, Learn**

### **Read Luke 2:1-7**

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. <sup>2</sup> (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup> And everyone went to their own town to register.

<sup>4</sup> So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. <sup>5</sup> He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, <sup>7</sup> and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

**1. Re-read Verses 1-3. Discuss what we learn of Caesar Augustus and how people viewed his census?**

*He was the ruler of the entire Roman world (Verse 1); he could tell his citizens to participate in the census (Verse 1-2) and they would do so (Verse 3) because he was their king.*

**2. Look at Verses 4-5. Explain what Joseph and Mary did on hearing of Caesar Augustus' decree.**

*Joseph and Mary obeyed the king (Verse 4); They traveled from Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem (Verse 4) even though she was due to have her baby soon (Verse 5)*

**3. In Verses 6-7, how does the King of Kings arrive in Bethlehem?**

*The time came for the baby to be born (Verse 6); Mary gave birth to her firstborn, a son - God's plan (Verse 7); Mary wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger (Verse 7) because there was no guest room available for them (Verse 7).*

**4. Discuss if this is the arrival people would have expected for the King who was to fulfill God's plan. Why/why not?**

*This is not how people envisioned the Messiah - the saviour who would take away the sins of the world - arriving in the world. Entering the world so simply, so human in the form of a baby and being laid in a manger wrapped in cloths instead of fine clothing.*

*This birth fulfills God's promises in a subtle and humble way. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding him, Jesus - the baby of promise had arrived.*

## Meaning

*The fulfillment of God's promises and his kingdom of redemption comes subtly and humbly. Humble parents bringing the child of promise into a world of little certainty. Augustine fought for his reign and measured his success on the size of his kingdom. Mary and Joseph could not secure a crib even among relatives. But the baby of promise came.*

## Application

- **Topic A: God shows no favouritism.** With the contrast between the rulers of the world and Joseph and Mary, God selected virtual 'nobodies' to bring the King of Kings into the world! This is a truth echoed in Acts 10:34 and in James 2. He welcomes all to come to his kingdom and he displays no favouritism toward the rich and powerful. Like Luke 1:48, God is mindful of the humble. Let us not show favouritism.
- **Topic B: God shows humility.** Philippians 2:5-11 gives the nature of Jesus' incarnation as an explicit example of true humility. In what ways does the poem in Philippians exalt humility?
- **Topic C: Counting our blessings.** Mary and Joseph were far from home, close to the bottom of the social food-chain, and making use of animal food troughs for a crib. And yet they looked after the treasure that God had given to them. They held in their hands the only important thing in the world - salvation. Colossians 2:6-7 points the Christian pathway

toward an overflowing of thankfulness. How can you put aside your hardships and give thanks to God for the good things he has done and is doing? Is salvation at the forefront of your mind when you think of praise points?

## **Prayer for the week**

*Father God, help us to be thankful for the things you have done. For bringing peace into this world through your Son and for letting us carry the good news in this world, we give you thanks and praise. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.*



