

Born to Win

The Times of Abijah

by Ronald L. Dart

Luke 1

AKJV

⁵ There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth.

Now, sometimes when you're reading the Bible, you come across phrases and words that you tend to elide in your own mind: you just sort of brush it aside. That's not an important thing; you look for the important stuff. Sometimes the names, who the guy was the son of, various and sundry little things... and you would sort of think maybe this thing that he was "of the course of Abia (Abijah)" was kind of unnecessary that Luke include that in this particular case. But you would be wrong. Because that little phrase is *extremely* important.

Now, this gospel account by Luke is sort of a letter that's written to a man named Theophilus. And I think it's significant to realize that Theophilus would have understood *precisely* what Luke was talking about, which means to me that he was very familiar with the Old Testament; because you had to know that the priesthood served in the temple in a cycle of "courses". In other words, there were groups, small groups of them, and they had their week out of the year (actually two weeks out of the year) that they served in the temple. They had specific duties, they had to be there during that time, and the rest of the year they did other stuff. But each course of the priesthood always knew in what week of the sacred calendar they were going to be serving in the temple. And it was always the same. Now, E. W. Bullinger calculates the two weeks of the course of Abijah to the dates in the Hebrew calendar. And their *approximate* dates in *our* calendar are...the two times of the year when he would have been in there were June 13th through the 19th and the week of December 6th through the 12th...*roughly* in our calendar, because the calendars kind of, as you well know, probably jigger back and forth depending upon how the New Moons fall in the Hebrew calendar.

Now, based on other factors he concludes that the occasion described in this particular story took place the third week of June in the year 5 BC, give or take a year. There's a high degree of probability that he's right about this. It's *certain* that the two alternative dates are the only dates available—late June or early December. These are the only times that he would have actually been serving in the temple. There are also important considerations that will grow out of this. And if it weren't for this, we might be left in doubt about some important things, but just this one little phrase tossed in here nails down something *very important*. Verse 6 of Luke 1:

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⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

A couple of really good, old people: diligent, careful, attentive to God. They were blameless, but...

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⁷ [...] they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.

⁸ And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course,

⁹ According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

Now, there were several duties that had to be carried out, all of them in “the holy place”, not “the Holy of Holies”. You only went there once a year, and only the high priest [**Hebrews 9:7, Leviticus 16**]. But they would, I guess, cast lots to decide who did what on what day. *His* lot, that fell to him, was to burn incense. Here's Zachariah in the holy place, going about his duties of refreshing and renewing the incense that's going up *here*, while the people outside were praying, with all the symbolism of the incense being the prayers of the saints going up before God. And all was normal, up to a certain point in time.

All of a sudden, one minute as he was serving there, he was all alone. And the next split second, there was *someone else* in the room. I cannot even begin to imagine what a *jar* this was to him. I don't know what the angel looked like. Commonly in the Old Testament, angels when they showed up on the scene, looked like men. And even though if it was, if it wasn't some shining apparition, I mean...somebody wasn't there, and now somebody *is* there, and that somebody's *not supposed* to be here. And it frightened Zachariah. It says

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¹² [...] he was troubled, and fear fell on him.

¹³ But the angel said to him, Fear not, Zacharias: for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elisabeth shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

This is going to become the father of John the Baptist. Now, something that struck me about that: He said, “your prayer is heard”. Now, *when* do you suppose Zacharias—*old* man—was praying that his wife would have a son? And did she know about that? We've got some old couples in here. I don't know how *you'd* feel about that. Would you girls...you *ladies* I should say, (“Girls” may be a little bit of an exaggeration) [*Laughter*], but do you really want your husband praying for a baby? Well, I don't know.

You know, it's also possible that he had prayed for her for years, but had not in recent years. It may have been a 30–40-year-old prayer. Sometimes God does things in *his* time, and it isn't exactly the same as *our* time. Anyway, he said,

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¹³ [...] your prayer is heard; and your wife Elisabeth shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

And I don't know about you, an old man...I think his jaw would have been on the floor. It was for Abraham. Abraham laughed. He was amazed. Sarah laughed, and then denied it, when they talked about having a child in the old age. But here we are. And it's *really interesting*, isn't it, how *often* this happens in GOD's economy—that the *old* couple bear the child that turns out to be a world figure in that world, at that time. Then he said,

Luke 1

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¹⁴ And you shall have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.

¹⁵ For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

John the Baptist would be a Nazirite [**Numbers 6**] from day one. And so by the time we was 30 years old, when he began, I'm sure, his ministry, his hair had never been cut, and he was basically a Nazirite.

Luke 1

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¹⁶ And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God.

¹⁷ And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

Now, you've got to understand this: this man knew his Bible, and this could not possibly have gone by him; because this is a *direct* reference to the end of Malachi, where it says

Malachi 4

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⁵ Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD:

⁶ And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse [*destruction*].

And here's Zachariah hearing that he's going to be the father of the one who does this thing. It was a bit much. This had to be electrifying, because he knew the scripture, and he also had to know the messianic expectations and implications connected to it.

Now, they tell us that at this particular point of time in the history of Israel messianic expectations were running high. There were *a lot* of people who were expecting the Messiah. They talked about it constantly, prayed for it constantly, and now all of a sudden he hears the first hint that it is coming.

Luke 1

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¹⁸ And Zachariah said unto the angel, How shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well advanced in years.

¹⁹ And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stands in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto you, and to show you these glad tidings.

²⁰ And, behold, you shall be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because you believe not my words[...]

I think there was probably more to it than that. I think basically it was a part of the signs that were going to be shown—that he would be dumb just to underline it all. But that was as good excuse as any. “You don't trust, huh? Okay. You're not going to be able to speak.”

Luke 1

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²¹ And the people waited for Zachariah, and marveled that he tarried so long in the temple.

²² And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: [...]

Actually, it's hard to imagine he wouldn't be able to talk, anyway. But still, he couldn't talk.

Luke 1

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²² [...] and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless.

²³ And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his service were accomplished, he departed to his own house.

²⁴ And after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying,

²⁵ Thus has the Lord dealt with me in the days in which he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.

You know, it's kind of funny to imagine him going home and telling Elizabeth about this—the vision that he had seen. It's also kind of funny to imagine them making plans to do something about it, and to consider, “Well, you know, is it tonight? Is it tomorrow night? When are we going to make this move?” *[Laughter]* I think some of the older people among us are laughing more than anybody else here. *[Laughter]* It can't have been very long after his course was over that this happened; it couldn't have been more than a matter of a day or two. And as I say, I can't imagine what Elizabeth thought when he told her this. And we can conclude, safely, that John was conceived in the fourth week of June. Now, why on earth is this important? Ah, read on, verse 26:

Luke 1

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²⁶ And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,

Gabriel must have been having *a ball* with all of this. He was sent...

Luke 1

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²⁷ To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

All right, what is the sixth month after the last week of June? The last week of December. So we've come to the end of December, right? Just so we know where we're at. Now, mind you, this is not the time of Jesus' birth. This is the time of the annunciation to Mary and the *conception* of Jesus, not his birth—right at the end of our calendar year.

Luke 1

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²⁸ And the angel came in to her, and said, Hail, you that are highly favored, the Lord is with you: blessed are you among women.

Hah, what an understatement. This must have been a remarkable young woman. Never in all of this does she lose her balance, her perspective. She maintains her composure through the whole thing. Zacharias was *scared stiff*. She doesn't seem to have been that frightened; she was just *puzzled*.

Luke 1

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²⁹ And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

³⁰ And the angel said to her, Fear not, Mary: for you have found favor with God.

We always like to hear that.

Luke 1

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³¹ And, behold, you shall conceive in your womb, and bring forth a son, and shall call his name JESUS.

³² He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give to him the throne of his father David:

³³ And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

I figure that this girl was probably *still in her teens* with this happened, and the composure with which she faces this announcement is fascinating to me. And he explained it to her. Now, she said,

Luke 1

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³⁴ [...] How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

³⁵ And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God.

What an honor, what an *incredible* honor bestowed upon her. “Oh, by the way”, he said,

Luke 1

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³⁶ And, behold, your cousin Elizabeth, she has also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren.

³⁷ For with God nothing shall be impossible.

³⁸ And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to your word. And the angel departed from her.

You know, I read this and I *still* am amazed at the girl’s aplomb. Now, the men who encounter...this shepherds later on who are going to have a whole bunch of angels appear to them, and sing songs to them, are scared to death. *Fear* is the natural result of these things. Mary heard it, Mary accepted it, and Mary said, “Let it be according to what you say.”

Luke 1

KJ2000

³⁹ And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah;

⁴⁰ And entered into the house of Zachariah, and greeted Elizabeth.

⁴¹ And it came to pass, that, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit:

Boy, there's a lot of things going on here. And the realization that John's identity was well established in *the sixth month*, that the Holy Spirit was in this boy apparently even at this early stage, and the *voice* of the mother of his Lord coming into the room caused him to leap in his mother's womb. It's...it's just staggering if you consider the implications.

Luke 1

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⁴² And she spoke out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

⁴³ And what is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

⁴⁴ For, see, as soon as the voice of your salutation sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.

⁴⁵ And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.

“Blessed is she who believed.” Poor Zacharias, you know, he just couldn't bring himself to *just take it*; he had to have a sign to take him a step further. There follows in the account the wonderful blessing that Mary pronounces. It's often called the *Magnificat* of Mary—beautiful piece of poetry. She's not only the mother of Jesus, she's a poet.

John the Baptist was born in late March. If you've done your little counting off on your fingers about how long this type of thing takes. There is another great prophecy by Zacharias at this time—as he lays out what's going to happen, what his own son is going to be doing. And this child, John, who would be called the baptist...

Luke 1

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⁸⁰ [...] grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing to Israel.

And that brings us to the account as it develops in Luke, the second chapter.

Luke 2

AKJV

¹ And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.

We don't know a whole bunch about this. We don't know an awful lot about why it was so, and why they couldn't pay their taxes in Nazareth. Why was it necessary to go to Bethlehem, even for a census? No explanation is offered by Luke; he just said they had to go.

Luke 2

AKJV

³ And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

⁵ To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

And every time I read that particular scripture, I think of the women that we see from time to time, who are in the last stages of their pregnancy, walking along, holding their back with one hand, and trying to

maintain their balance as they go on their way, with the incredible burden of the baby that they are carrying inside. (Actually, it's a little more obvious these days, because it seems like women have taken to wearing things when they're pregnant to make a very great point of the fact that they're pregnant. I don't know what's going on there.) But anyway, poor Mary has had to make this journey all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem in the last week of her pregnancy. So here we are. (And by the way, Joseph's closest approximation to an SUV would have been a donkey, so...there wasn't a whole lot of comfort there.)

Luke 2

AKJV

⁶ And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

This is just...you know, it's gone into the language of our society. It is *so* familiar to us as we read this, but this is *so important*, what is happening here. They did not go to a hotel. They tried, they couldn't get in. There was no comfortable bed. There was hay. It was a stable. That was the whole shelter they were able to have. And this seems to have been deliberate, on God's part, that it should be this way. And here, in the normal process of childbirth—with all the labor, all the discomfort, all the pain, everything that goes with it...(and many of you know all too well what goes with it)...a new baby was born. She took him, wrapped him up, and laid in the manger (that is, the feeding trough) on some hay that was there.

Now, the guys in this whole story that I'm jealous of are a bunch of shepherds who were keeping their sheep not very far away in the field at night.

Luke 2

AKJV

⁹ And, see, the angel of the Lord came on them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid [*Our of their wits*..

¹⁰ And the angel said to them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, [...]

And you know, it's almost as though this bunch of angels were sitting around heaven, waiting for the blessing event to take place, and then one of them looked at another one and says, "I gotta tell somebody, or I'm gonna die. You know, we've just *got* to tell somebody. This is the biggest event in the history of the world!" And so here they came.

Luke 2

AKJV

¹⁰ [...] good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

¹¹ For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

Now, you've got to understand this: to those shepherds, *they knew* what that meant. It meant that the Messiah has been born.

Luke 2

AKJV

¹² And this shall be a sign to you; You shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

There's nothing miraculous that you would think, "Why is this important to tell them this is *a sign*?" I think the way you look at this is you say that this is *significant* for you. You will find this babe wrapped in ordinary swaddling clothes, and lying in a feeding trough on some hay there. This is significant. What was significant is that Jesus' birth was as *lowly* as any person in this room had a birth. His birth was *ordinary*. It was *humble*. It was *poor*. And the circumstances were right down there with the ordinary human beings of this world.

Luke 2

AKJV

¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

George Frideric Handel made a stab at making a great chorus of this, and he did wonderfully well. But it has to be like a bee buzzing around in a bottle compared to what these guys heard on that night.

Luke 2

AKJV

¹⁵ And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even to Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.

¹⁶ And they came with haste, and found [...]

And I think it's really important for us to focus here on what they found. They found Mary, and Joseph, and a tiny little baby lying in a manger. Jesus did not come to earth full grown. He did not suddenly walk out of the hills of Judea as a full-grown man. He did not come to earth as an apparition—as something that's not really flesh and blood, that just appears to be. He didn't come that way. He came to this earth as *a baby*—as *weak*, as *dependent*, as *vulnerable* as any baby ever came into the world; as vulnerable as every single one of you here when your mother took you first in her arms for the first time, and put you to her breast; totally dependent on his mother for nourishment and care, his stepfather for protection and taking care of them—absolutely, completely *dependent* in this world. And you know, I think this is so important for us to understand.

Luke 2

AKJV

¹⁷ And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

¹⁸ And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told to them.

I doubt if they slept for days.

It's *easy*, you know, to read this and understand why these scriptures have captivated men down through time, why so many songs have been written, and why it just captures our imaginations. Forget Christmas and all the claptrap associated with Christmas. Forget the commercialization, and all the cheap decorations. But *never* forget the moment, the day that Jesus Christ took his first breath as a human being. *Never* forget the glory. *Never* forget the awe. And *never* forget the love of a mother who took *this* child to her breast for the first time. I've often felt, frankly, there's something almost mystical

about a woman breastfeeding a child. Can you imagine the mother breastfeeding *this* child for the first time?

The reason I think what I think about this—that this happened under this moon (I think you can see it when you walk out tonight)...It was under this moon...It may have been last week, or it may have been on Trumpets, it may have been *tonight*...But it was *surely* under this moon that these events take place. And the reason I think this is because of the way John opens his gospel.

John 1

AKJV

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

And then he says,

John 1

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¹⁴ And the Word was made flesh, and dwelled among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

Jesus was made *human*. He became flesh. He came as *one of us* to save us. What a *glorious* night that was.

Transcript of a
sermon by
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