

# Introduction

## *Sometimes God Sneaks Up on You*

**T**he blazing sun had fallen over the Negev Desert for 146,100 days without a single word from the God of Israel. Four centuries had passed since the last inspired Hebrew prophets, Zechariah and Malachi, had discharged their ministry. The convulsions of history had coughed up then swept away the Medes and Persians, the Seleucids, and the Maccabees. Roman soldiers now occupied the land of Israel.

In the Judean Hills lived one elderly couple who had not lost faith. They knew God was still speaking—through His Hebrew scriptures, which they studied every day. They felt He wasn't finished with the earth or with the Jews, so they labored on faithfully, joyfully, even in their advanced years. They were obscure people, quiet and confident and steadfast, though they knew the heaviness of pungent sorrow.

But they hadn't a clue that BC was about to turn to AD or that the last century was about to become the first century, with them at center stage. Zechariah and Elizabeth had no inkling the Lord was sneaking up on them, ready to transform their hillside home into the cradle of Christianity, ready to answer prayers long ago offered, ready to send them blessings unforeseen and to let grace drop from above like reviving rain.

God hadn't forgotten them! He'd been planning something exuberant for them for a long time, for He wanted the gospel story to begin with them!

In just the same way, the Lord has been planning something special for you for a long time, from before the foundation of the earth. He envisioned

you before you were born, and He appointed you to be alive today, in these turbulent times. You are not here by accident. God ordained your background, He governs your life down to the details, He dispatches angels to help you, He wants to use your voice, and He is ready to give you a winning life.

We can learn all that from this lowly couple in the Judean Hills—two souls who knew heartache yet had remained faithful to the Lord and to each other in the winter of life. When world conditions were uncertain and danger was near, God burst into their lives, giving them the unimaginable opportunity to set into motion the events triggering the first coming of Christ.

He wants to burst into your life too! You can be sure of it. And when He bursts in, there's no telling what will happen! He sends drops of grace from above with blessings unforeseen, unexpected, undeserved, yet coming right on time. He wants you to live with exuberance. Don't underrate Him, and never undervalue His plan for your life today. He hasn't forgotten you or your needs or your future—not for one millisecond.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth has intrigued me, in part, because it is so overlooked. I'm always interested in overlooked people—sometimes we all feel we're overlooked, don't we? Although the entire New Testament story of Jesus and His gospel began with them, we usually skip the chapter that tells their story.

So here's the question I've been pondering: Who begins reading a book with the second chapter? When you pick up a book—fiction or not—do you typically skip the first chapter and begin with the second? On a few occasions, I've read the first chapter and thrown the book away (I hope you don't do that with this one), but I don't recall having started reading a book in chapter two. The first chapter typically gives the setting and framework, allowing us to follow the plot and the progress of the whole thing.

Why, then, do we begin the gospel story of Christmas in Luke chapter 2?

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. (vv. 1–3 NKJV)

When we begin in Luke 2, we miss the actual beginning of the Christmas story and we forget the original heroes—this couple, gray and graced with

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wrinkles, caring for each other as they quietly served the Lord in the hills south of Jerusalem. They lived off the beaten path—but that’s right where God surged into history after four hundred years of silence.

Before Joseph and Mary, there were Zechariah and Elizabeth, and before Jesus Christ there was John the Baptist.

Luke, that masterful historian, gave us parallel accounts in chapters 1 and 2 of his gospel. Luke 1 is primarily devoted to this older couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who lived in a village in Judea, and to the miraculous birth of John the Baptist. Chapter 2 is primarily devoted to a young couple, Joseph and Mary, who lived in an equally obscure village in lower Galilee, and to the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ.

The two stories mirror each other, as one commentator observed:

The same angel, Gabriel, appeared to Zechariah and Mary; both were troubled by the angelic visit; both were told not to be afraid; both were told of the future birth of a son; both births were associated with the work of the Holy Spirit; in both passages the angel gave the name for the son; in both the angel stated that the son would be great; in both the sons’ future roles in God’s plan were announced; and in both we are told of the birth, circumcision, and naming of the sons.<sup>1</sup>

In the pages to come, I want to unravel two dozen “God Lessons” for your life and mine, woven into the fabric of the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth in the first chapter of Luke’s gospel.

The name Zechariah means “God has not forgotten.”

The name Elizabeth means “God remembers His oath.”

This oft-forgotten story can teach us the secrets of overcoming griefs, of fulfilling the unique role God has for us, and of hastening the coming of Christ. They can show us how to make the rest of our life the best of our life. They advertise God’s offer to infuse us with significance, success, and satisfaction.

Your almighty Savior has been planning something special for you for a long time! He expects you to claim His promises, to trust His faithfulness, and to praise Him. He desires to give you a Spirit-filled life and a Christ-centered victory. He intends to use your preordained personality for His preordered

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purposes. His life for you isn't boring or dutiful; it's full of exuberance. You're not forgotten but forgiven and blessed forever.

That's what Zechariah and Elizabeth wanted to tell us. They discovered a God who delights in sneaking up on His children with blessings unforeseen, with grace from above.

This is their story—and yours.

It's high time to discover God's plan for your life and to claim the victory!

PS: Each chapter ends with a passage, prayer, or hymn for you to say aloud. Most of us read our books silently unless we're reading to someone else. But try reading orally the final words of every chapter to affirm the truth to your heart. If you're using this for a small group study, try saying each prayer, hymn, or quote in unison.

Each chapter in this book also includes study questions. A video study and printed study guide are available for personal or group study at [www.robertjmorgan.com](http://www.robertjmorgan.com).

## CHAPTER 1

# God Appointed You for This Very Time

*(Luke 1:5)*

I recall attending college chapel one day when Stuart Briscoe was preaching. In his inimitable British accent, he uttered a statement I didn't write down but have never forgotten: "You were born at just the right time; you'll die at just the right time; you're living at just the right speed. And you are exactly where God wants you to be right now for His purposes."

About the same time, I found a verse in the Bible I've since adopted as my life verse: "You saw me before I was born and scheduled each day of my life before I began to breathe. Every day was recorded in your book!" (Psalm 139:16 TLB).

Those quotes from Stuart Briscoe and from King David came at a crucial point in my life when I was battling low self-esteem and life confusion. Since then, I've found many other verses and insights that reinforce the fact that God knew me in advance and designed His own plan for my life.

Ephesians 1:4, for example, says, "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world." And consider 2 Chronicles 29:11: "My sons, do not be negligent now, for the LORD has chosen you to stand before him and serve him, to minister before him and to burn incense."

The apostle Paul wrote, "He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and

grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time” (2 Timothy 1:9).

In His grace, God has been planning and preparing your life from the beginning of time!

I’ve come to realize that for the child of God, there are no accidents in our calendars nor blunders in God’s calculus for our days. His plan for us isn’t thwarted by change or chance. He who determines the earth’s endless orbit and the eagle’s pathless flight also orders the steps and the stops of His children. We do not walk by fate but by faith, and our heavenly Father watches over our routes.

## The Fullness of Time

After his matchless prologue in Luke 1:1–4, Luke began the gospel story by saying, “In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah” (1:5).

There could hardly be a greater contrast of men—a powerful but paranoid king, a humble but hardworking priest. Yet they had one thing in common: Both seemed near the end of their lives.

Zechariah was “very old” (v. 7); and as for Herod, well, that tyrant died in 4 BC, as he was reaching the age of seventy. Years before, the Romans had appointed him “king of the Jews,” though he didn’t reign with autonomy but at the pleasure of the Roman emperor. His royal title, it seems, was a joke from God, for the real King of the Jews—the baby Jesus—was to be born right under his nose, sending him into murderous convulsions during his final days.

Herod was cruel and paranoid. He killed his own family members like a farmer slaughtering hogs, and he had no qualms about massacring the little boys of Bethlehem in a futile attempt to kill Jesus. In the days of Zechariah, Herod’s cruelty was exacerbated by his gruesome diseases.

One of the most unpleasant sentences I’ve ever read in a biography is this diagnosis of Herod’s terminal disease from an early historian: “The chief violence of his pain lay on his colon; an aqueous and transparent liquor also had settled itself about his feet, and a like matter afflicted him at the bottom of his belly. . . . His privy-member was putrefied, and produced worms; and when he sat upright, he had a difficulty of breathing, which was very loathsome on

account of the stench of his breath. . . . He had also convulsions in all parts of his body.”<sup>1</sup>

Some historians believe he had been poisoned. What if this man were your neighbor and the king of your little patch of the world? What if you lived or died at his whim or humor?

Many of us are frustrated at the state of the globe, and we’ve learned to speak out on the moral, legal, and governmental issues of our day. But in most of the Western world, none of us lives under a monster like Herod.

Yet Zechariah and Elizabeth were born at just the right moment in history; they would die at the right time; and they were living at the right speed. They were just where the Lord wanted them to be so He could burst into the human story and usher into the world the legitimate King of the Jews. It occurred in the fullness of time when world conditions were providentially and uniquely opportune for the entrance of the gospel (Galatians 4:4).

This is illustrated by the inscription over the cross of Christ, which said: “This is the King of the Jews.” According to Luke 23:38 (NKJV), this was written in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. These three languages represented the three great forces that came together like three rivers merging to send the gospel abroad.

The Romans, who increasingly spoke Latin, had established peace, unity, and roads across the empire, making it much easier to take the gospel to the edges of the known world. Because of the dispersion of the Jews, there were synagogues throughout the provinces, which served as forward-operating bases for the early evangelists. And the whole world spoke Greek in addition to their local languages, thanks to the lingering influence of Alexander the Great. In the providence of God, the world was ready for Christ in ways peculiar to that moment.

John the Baptist—the son given to Zechariah and Elizabeth—stepped into history just then. He became, in essence, the last of the Old Testament prophets. His ministry linked the old and new covenants, preparing the way for Jesus from Nazareth, his cousin, who was six months younger than he. We can think of Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John as the trio who ended Old Testament history, began the New Testament story, and connected the two like the spine of a book.

Just to make sure we don’t miss the point, the very last words of the Old Testament say, “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and

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dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents” (Malachi 4:5–6).

The gospel story starts at this very point by raising up the unlikely son of Zechariah as the contemporary prophet who “will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children” (Luke 1:17).

Jesus Himself said, “And if you are willing to accept it, he [John the Baptist] is the Elijah who was to come” (Matthew 11:14).

### THE AMAZING LINK

Recall God’s last inspired words in the Old Testament through the prophet Malachi.

Now consider God’s first spoken words in the New Testament era through the angel Gabriel:

Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. . . . 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. (Luke 1:13, 17)

Do you see how remarkable this is? The Old Testament ends precisely where the gospel story begins—one seamless tale spanning four hundred silent years. And an old Judean couple provided the coupling, with John the Baptist as the new Elijah to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus.

## The Time of Your Life

What that means to you isn’t hard to figure out. The lessons are transferable.

If God had wanted you to have been born in the days of Herod the Great, He could have done that. He could have dropped you into the fifth century amid the collapsing ruins of the Roman Empire. If He had wanted you to join Martin Luther in the Reformation in the 1500s, He could easily have brought

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that about. Perhaps you would have loved attending D. L. Moody's evangelist campaigns of the 1800s or you've wondered what it was like to serve the Lord in the Roaring Twenties a hundred years ago.

But the Lord, in His sovereign decree and omniscient wisdom, brought about a chain reaction of generational descent through cascading rivers of genetics over thousands of years through ancestors, most of whose names are lost to history—all to make sure you came into the world at the very moment He needed you.

God has appointed you for this time, and He has a plan to use every day of your life to fulfill His goals and achieve His glory. Hymnist Anna Waring wrote:

*Father, I know that all my life  
Is portioned out for me,  
And the changes that are sure to come  
I do not fear to see;  
But I ask Thee for a present mind  
Intent on pleasing Thee.<sup>2</sup>*

Our lives are portioned out by our Lord. It's no accident you're alive today! We're here to serve our generation at the pleasure of the Father. Our work wasn't needed a hundred years ago. It's needed now, and the results will endure until Christ comes again. The Lord's words to Jeremiah represent His calling of us: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you" (Jeremiah 1:5).

On the outskirts of my hometown of Elizabethton, Tennessee, there's a tranquil series of rolling green hills called Happy Valley Cemetery. My dear wife, Katrina, rests there, and the headstone is a double one. Whenever I visit, I see these words on "my side" of the headstone:

ROBERT JOHN MORGAN  
MAY 29, 1952-

That's obviously sobering to me. I don't know what date will complete the equation nor how many days remain for me on earth. But the Lord knows, and I'm content with that. I want to serve faithfully here and now, fulfilling whatever agenda He has for me.

These words from Acts 20:24 have become like a personal motto: “However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me.” Take a moment to recall the date of your birth. For just a moment, envision your own tombstone. Notice the dash between the date of your birth and that of your death. That dash is your destiny, and God has designed it all perfectly. No, not everything that happens to you is good, as we’ll see, but nothing is wasted.

When I was in college, professors talked a lot about existentialism, which was a prevailing philosophy at the time. In simplest terms, it says that human beings simply exist. There is no grand scheme, no prearranged agenda for us. We simply appear for a short time on earth and then disappear, and we have to try to find some kind of meaning within ourselves to stave off the ultimate despair of our condition.

The French philosopher Albert Camus cast his shadow over existentialist philosophy, but what many people don’t know was that Camus himself could not live with the implications of his own existentialism. He had long conversations with an American pastor named Howard Mumma, who frequently preached in Paris. On one occasion early in their conversations, Camus said, “I am a disillusioned and exhausted man. . . . Is it any wonder that, at my age, I am looking for something to believe in? . . . It is impossible to live a life without meaning.”<sup>3</sup>

Mumma presented Camus with a French copy of the Bible, which Camus devoured, and whenever the pastor preached in Paris, the philosopher would slip into the services, trying to be unseen. He told Mumma, “The reason I have been coming to church is because I am seeking. I’m almost on a pilgrimage—seeking something to fill the void that I am experiencing—and no one else knows.”<sup>4</sup>

He went on to say that the rise of Adolf Hitler and Nazism had a lot to do with driving him to existentialism. “Since I have been reading the Bible, I sense that there is something—I don’t know if it is personal or if it is a great idea or powerful influence—but there is something that can bring meaning to my life. . . . Howard, I am ready. I want this,” he said, with tears in his eyes.<sup>5</sup>

I don’t know whether Albert Camus found the Lord Jesus or not. He died in a car wreck on January 4, 1960, at the age of forty-six. But this I do know: You and I can find what the great philosopher was seeking; we have it close

at hand. We are not accidental mutations who emerge from the mud only to quickly die with no purpose or destiny. The apostle Paul said about his life, “I, Paul, have been sent on special assignment by Christ as part of God’s master plan” (Colossians 1:1 MSG). We should jump for joy when we realize God has such a plan for our lives as well!

Dr. A. W. Tozer wrote, “The man of true faith may live in the absolute assurance that his steps are ordered by the Lord. For him, misfortune is outside the bounds of possibility. He cannot be torn from this earth one hour ahead of the time which God has appointed, and he cannot be detained on earth one moment after God is done with him.”<sup>6</sup>

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### TEN VERSES ABOUT GOD’S PLANS FOR YOU

- Many, LORD my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us. (Psalm 40:5)
- Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. . . . I know the plans I have for you. (Jeremiah 1:5; 29:11)
- The Lord will work out his plans for my life. (Psalm 138:8 TLB)
- Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and he will establish your plans. (Proverbs 16:3)
- We have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan. (Ephesians 1:11 NLT)
- He enabled me to understand all the details of the plan. (1 Chronicles 28:19)
- For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. (Ephesians 2:10 NLT)
- You saw me before I was born and scheduled each day of my life before I began to breathe. Every day was recorded in your book! (Psalm 139:16 TLB)
- The plan of God for you is good. (Romans 12:2 PHILLIPS)
- And we know that all that happens to us is working for our good if we love God and are fitting into his plans. (Romans 8:28 TLB)

## No Time to Lose

Are you willing to embrace God's predesigned blueprint for your life? I call it the "cross-examined life." We need to view the significance of our lives through God's love for us, displayed on the cross. How wonderful to be part of what He did for us there! Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Our response is: "Lord, lead the way!"

His outline for your days may be different from your past anticipations, but God intends for you to be an original. No one like you has ever lived before or will ever live again. And only by stepping into the center of His perfect will can you find the significance, success, and satisfaction needed for a joyful and productive life. The Bible says,

With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity." (Romans 12:1–2 PHILLIPS)

Jesus was not shy about telling us to follow Him. The apostle Paul told us that doing so involved, in a sense, dying to ourselves. This isn't terminology to avoid but to embrace. It's the perfect paradox for an extraordinary life: "known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich" (2 Corinthians 6:9–10).

When we say yes to God's will for us, the Lord Jesus turns our lives inside out so we can turn the world upside down (Acts 17:6). Paul the apostle wrote, "And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:15).

One day, when I was attending Wheaton College Graduate School, I took a drive through the Illinois cornfields west of town. I wanted to get married and had finally found the right woman—Katrina. I hadn't proposed yet, and

I didn't really know what her response would be. A thought entered my mind: What if God didn't want me to be married at all? What if God's plan for me included staying single? Was I willing?

In the driver's seat that day, I anguished over this. I finally used an old Victorious Christian Life maxim: "Lord, I can't say I am willing. But I am willing *to be* willing."

The burden lifted!

Katrina and I had forty-three wonderful years of marriage, but now I truly am single. And perhaps the simple prayer I prayed in 1975 has circled back to help me now. If there is a particularly difficult area for you to surrender to the Lord, simply tell Him the truth about it. But explain also that you are *willing to be willing*. The Lord will take it from there.

Just like Zechariah and Elizabeth, you were born at the right time and you are living at the right speed. It's not too late to become what God intends for you. You're alive in this crucial moment just before the Lord appears again.

Try saying this affirmation aloud:

The plan of God for me is good. He has appointed me for this very time!

Yes, He has done it from the foundation of the world! This is my time to serve Him with all my heart. I offer myself to Him who offers to me a plan perfected in heaven for impacting the earth. Praise His name!

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you ever feel like God has forgotten you? How do the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth encourage you?
2. Look back at Psalm 139:16. How does this verse encapsulate the message of this chapter? What does it mean to you personally?
3. This chapter introduces the idea of a "cross-examined life" from Luke 9:23. What specific steps can you take this week to better live in the light of Jesus and His plan for you?