

Introducing Jesus

Study 5: Luke's Picture of Jesus

Q. Recap: What is a Gospel?

Is Luke even a Gospel in the first place?

Luke's book is very different from the other three Biblical Gospels in several respects.

- Luke is much longer than the other Gospels
- It is the only one to contain information about Jesus' childhood and has far more details than the others about his life after the Resurrection.
- It is the only one that has a sequel (Acts).
- It is the only one not written by a Jewish author.

These last two points are worthy of closer consideration. The fact that Luke was not Jewish (he is often identified with the Gentile doctor who accompanied Paul on several of his journeys – Col 4:14, Phm 24) may account for his different approach to writing. In 1:3 he describes his work as an “orderly account” and some have taken his close attention to historical detail as evidence that he is not only more historically accurate than the other Gospels but also more dispassionate and therefore less interested in being persuasive than them. Is Luke simply a biography then, more in line with modern journalistic biographies? Recall that in Study 1 we said of Gospels that:

“the purpose of the writing is not to give us interesting or accurate biographical information about Jesus, but rather to use the “story” of Jesus' life, teachings and passion to convince us of the “message” or “good news” of Jesus.
“The writing is persuasive, it challenges the reader to make a response.”

Luke is certainly more skilled as a story-teller than the other Gospel writers (in fairness to them, he is the only one writing in his mother-tongue). He tells many more stories about and by Jesus than the others do and skillfully crafts them together into a compelling narrative – unlike Mark's rushed narrative (“immediately” Mk 1:10, 2:8, 3:6 – 35 times in total!), or Matthew's chunky insertion of teachings (Ch 5-7) or parables, or John's staccato sentences.

But we should not be misled. Luke has a definite purpose in mind to persuade us. Right at the start he describes this purpose to his reader, Theophilus (God-lover), “that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught”, namely about “the things that have been accomplished among us” (i.e. the things in Jesus' life that accomplished/fulfilled what had been foretold in Scripture). As the story unfolds though an even deeper and more urgent question emerges: Will we join Jesus on the journey towards his new Kingdom?

Luke-Acts as a literary unit

Although we'll focus mainly on Jesus in Luke's Gospel it is very difficult to deal with this topic separately from Acts since Luke and Acts form a single storyline. Their connection goes beyond having the same author and being chronologically consecutive. There are themes and motifs that are carried throughout the double volume and many of the prophecies in the Gospel are fulfilled in the second book.

The most notable of these is the prophecy spoken at Jesus' Baptism by Simeon foretelling the fulfillment of Israel's calling to be a "light for revelation to the Gentiles" (2:32, Is 42:6) which is picked up again by Paul in Acts 13:47.

Most important for the purpose of this study is how the structure of the two books together helps us get a picture of Jesus. The Gospel tells the story of Jesus' life and work in his bodily form as a man born in Nazareth and Crucified on Calvary. The book of Acts tells the story of Jesus' life and work in the form of the Holy Spirit at work in the Church. In both books the city of Jerusalem plays a pivotal symbolic role along with the theme of "journey". Jerusalem is "home" as we will see later. In the Gospel, Jesus and others are always returning "home" to Jerusalem where much of the action of the book takes place. In the book of Acts Jesus' Spirit is constantly leading people away from Jerusalem towards the "ends of the earth."

Structure of the book

1:1-4	The prologue (to whom Luke is writing and why)
1:5-2:52	Infancy and childhood narratives
3:1-4:13	Jesus prepares for ministry (John, Baptism, Genealogy & Temptation)
4:14-9:50	Jesus' ministry in Galilee Stating his Mission (4:16-30) Good News for the Poor (4:31-5:16; 6:17-9:6) Forming the "New Israel" with 12 leaders (6:12-16) Resistance and foreboding (5:17-6:11; 9:7-50)
9:51-19:28	The Journey to Jerusalem
19:29-21:38	In Jerusalem
22:1-23:56	The Passion Narrative
24:1-53	The Resurrection Narrative

Q. What do we know about Jesus' family and background? Does it matter?

Jesus in Luke's Gospel

1. Themes Introduced

Only Luke and Matthew tell us about Jesus' birth and childhood. For both, their purpose is not just to fill in gaps about Jesus' early years for curious readers. These birth stories serve instead to introducing important themes for their respective Gospels. In the case of Luke, there are two parallel stories about John and Jesus. Both are foretold by angels; both have parents who sing songs of praise to God; both are born in troubled circumstances (Elizabeth has been barren; Mary is a virgin). The circumstances and the contents of the praise songs remind us of Old Testament

prophecies. Luke is carefully building continuity between his story and the Old Testament expectations. John is the prophetic messenger who prepares Israel to meet their God. Jesus is the Messianic King who will bring God's reign and blessing.

Two themes are introduced at the beginning of the book that are worth noting as they will carry on into Jesus' ministry and into the book of Acts.

- Mary's hymn of Praise (1:46-55) is all about God lifting up the humble and reaching out to the hungry and the poor. This will emerge as a major theme when Jesus later declares the terms of his own mission.
- When Jesus is presented at the Temple, the old prophet Simeon sings a hymn recalling Israel historical vocation to be "a light to the nations". Luke emphasizes this point when he lists Jesus' forebears in 3:23-38. Where Matthew traces Jesus' genealogy back to Abraham to make the point that Jesus is fully a son of the Abrahamic covenant, Luke traces Jesus lineage all the way to Adam. For Luke Jesus is the Saviour who has come for the whole world and not just for Israel. This theme is carried to its completion in the words of Jesus at the end of the Gospel: "Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in [Christ's] name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (24:47) and in the book of Acts when the church's mission is expanded to reach even the Gentiles.

2. Jesus' Mission: To seek and save the lost

Both Mark and Matthew told us that Jesus' message (Good News) was that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Luke goes into more detail for us about the nature and character of that Kingdom. At the start of his ministry, Jesus appears in the synagogue in his hometown, Nazareth, to declare his mission:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (4:18-19)

"The poor" should not simply be seen as those who have little money. The Hebrew concept of the "poor" ('ani) referred to those of low social status, outsiders and those who had been excluded from community life because of their sin. "Liberty" similarly had a specific social meaning. It referred to the Old Testament practice of Jubilee (Lev 25), a time when slaves were freed, debts were cancelled, and social injustices were set right. So this is a very broad social programme that Jesus is declaring.

From the start of his ministry, Jesus sets about putting this mission into practice. He casts out demons (4:31-37), heals the sick (4:38-41), cleanses lepers (5:12-16), dines with tax collectors (5:27-32) and forgives sinners (7:36-50). He goes further though and begins to form a new community from among the "poor", outsiders and lost ones. Luke imagines this community as a new Israel, complete with 12 disciples (like the 12 tribes of Israel) and with a new Moses (Jesus) leading them into a new Exodus (freedom).

3. The Journey Motif

Throughout Luke and Acts, the idea of being on a journey recurs as a leading theme again and again. From Mary's journeys to visit Elizabeth (1:39) and then to Bethlehem to give birth (2:4), to the travelers on the road to Emmaus (24:13), the central characters are always on the road.

Two journeys are particularly important as themes in Luke's writing: The journey to Jerusalem and the journey from Jerusalem.

Luke sees Jerusalem as the "home" of the people Israel and their God. We will see in a moment how he develops this metaphor as it relates to all those who are lost and far away from home. In the Gospel the most important journey is the journey "home" to Jerusalem. Matthew, Mark and Luke all see Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his Passion there as significant but, whereas Mark announces Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (Mk 10:32) and has him arrive half a chapter later (Mk 11:1-11), Luke's Jesus takes ten chapters (Lk 9-19) to get there. Along the way the theme of home-coming is developed, which we will look at next.

Before we get there though, we should also note that this is not the final journey. While the earthly Jesus travels to Jerusalem to his crucifixion so that all the lost ones can come home, the Resurrected Jesus leads his followers (in the power of the Holy Spirit) out from Jerusalem to take the message of home-coming from Jerusalem to all nations, even to the ends of the earth. This second journey forms the thematic structure of the book of Acts.

4. Coming Home: Jesus the One who brings the lost ones home

"When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51). From this moment until his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (19:28), Jesus is on a journey towards Jerusalem. Along the way he sends out 70 disciples ahead of him to proclaim the Good News that God's Kingdom is near (10:1-16). His teachings in this section centre around trusting in God's provision creating a freedom from possessions that allows for a radical generosity.

Jesus continues to meet with and eat with outcasts, women, children, Samaritans, tax-collectors and sinners. He is still welcoming them "home" into the new community (new Israel) that he is forming. He also has meals with leaders of the Pharisees (11:37, 14:1) but uses these opportunities to accuse them of having neglected God's justice (11:42) and putting law ahead of mercy (14:4-5). Such actual meals become the content of the parables he tells. God's Kingdom is like a banquet to which all are invited but while the high and mighty squander their opportunities to attend, the poor, the crippled the lame and the blind end up attending in their place.

Such parables reach their climax in the stories of the lost things found in Ch 15, especially the story of the Prodigal Son (15:11-32). The meaning of the parable is clear: while God welcomes everyone – especially the lost – into his family, the tragedy is that Israel's leaders reject Jesus and his Kingdom.

Q. In what ways have you been welcomed "home" by Jesus?

How do you feel about others being welcomed "home" to God's banquet?

5. Will you join the Journey?

There is much more that can be said about Luke's Passion Narrative (19:29-23:56). In many respects Luke's account is similar to those of Mark and Matthew. The details he adds strengthen the themes we have already mentioned. For example the Last Supper reminds us that Jesus is forming a new community/Israel around a new Passover and a new Exodus, while in his final moments on the Cross he continues his programme to welcome outsiders as he forgives his executioners (23:34) and welcomes his co-condemned into his kingdom (23:45).

For now though we will conclude with one last journey story.

After the Resurrection Luke tells one of his most beautiful and moving stories. Two unknown disciples are walking away from Jerusalem, saddened by Jesus' death and confused by the stories of the empty tomb. A stranger accompanies them on their journey to their home in Emmaus. He teaches them because they have not yet comprehended that Jesus' Cross is the epitome of his upside-down Kingdom where the powerful are brought low and the humble are exalted. They do not recognize the stranger as Jesus until he breaks bread with them. They are no longer lost. They are no longer outsiders. They rush back to Jerusalem because the community there is their home now, no longer Emmaus.

Who are these disciples who are still being called home to be with the Resurrected Jesus and to join him on the second journey to take good news to all the nations?

Are you one of these disciples?

Will you join Jesus on the journey?