

## The Gospel according to **Luke**

### **Who was Luke?**

Luke wrote two books of the New Testament: the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Acts of the Apostles*. *Luke* is the longest book in the NT, and with his two books, Luke made the greatest written contribution to the NT.

We know that Luke was a doctor (Colossians 4v14). We also know that he travelled with Paul on his missionary journeys, because he occasionally writes 'we' (e.g. in Acts 16v11). He was probably a Gentile, although the evidence is not conclusive. Luke is a Greek name, and he had a good grasp of written Greek. Also in Colossians 4, Paul mentions him separately from the list of Jews.

### **Why was *Luke* written?**

There are two ways to answer this question.

Firstly, Luke tells us in the first four verses of the book: he wrote it for Theophilus, to confirm and support what he had been taught (1v4). Perhaps he knew of other accounts which were inaccurate? Or maybe the opposition he and Paul had experienced on their travels had prompted him to research and write this account? Whatever it was, Luke followed up the attempts of many others to write an account of Jesus' life and ministry, by writing his own. He felt qualified to do this because he had "carefully investigated everything from the beginning" (v3) himself.

But as he wrote the book, Luke clearly had certain issues in mind. The main aim of his gospel (and also of Acts) seems to be to show that the good news of Jesus Christ, and the offer of salvation, applies to all people. Throughout his Gospel, Luke points out example after example of the inclusion of unexpected people, from the shepherds at the beginning, through Romans, Samaritans, the poor, the sick, the demon-possessed, through to the women who support him until the end. If Luke was a Gentile, perhaps he felt the significance of this more than his fellow gospel writers?

The book contains a series of shocks, which constantly challenge the reader's assumptions, until they are confronted with biggest shocks of all – the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus!

### **When was Luke's Gospel written?**

Luke's Gospel and *Acts* were probably written in the early sixties AD, with Luke presumably being written first. *Acts* has an account of Paul's imprisonment (which happened at the beginning of the decade) so is unlikely to have been written earlier, and if they were written later they would surely have had details of significant events that happened later (especially the persecution of Christians by Nero in AD 64).

### **How is the book structured?**

Luke's Gospel can be divided as follows:

**1 - 2** – Beginnings – the births of John the Baptist and Jesus.

**3 - 9v50** – Ministry in Galilee

**9v51 – 19v27** – Journey to Jerusalem

**19v28 - 21** – Teaching in Jerusalem

**22 - 24** – Death, Resurrection and Ascension

A lot of the material in the book is familiar, because Luke seems to have borrowed heavily from other sources, especially Mark. Some suggest this is evidence of fabrication. However, we should expect some overlap in the stories as they are reports of the same events. Rather than rewording his other sources, Luke shows his confidence in their validity by incorporating their work into his.

### **Beginnings (1-2)**

The gospel begins with Luke's statement about the purpose of his book. This is followed by the interwoven stories of the conception of both John and Jesus. Luke emphasises the miraculous nature of both these births. Also, compare the reactions of the women with those of the men – right from the start, women feature highly and in a very positive light.

The story of Jesus' birth in chapter 2 also shows us the esteemed place of the poor and outcast in God's plan. Jesus is born in squalor. When he is presented at the temple (2v21-40), his parents are forced to offer the cheap version of the sacrifice (2 doves instead of a dove and a lamb, see Leviticus 12v8). And Luke makes a big deal of the visit of the shepherds – who would have been regarded at the time as shifty migrant workers.

As Jesus is presented at the temple, they are greeted by Anna and Simeon, who recognise the arrival of salvation. Simeon's words are significant in the context of Luke. He calls Jesus, “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (v32). The Gentiles, who had not been waiting as the Jews had, would not be excluded. The purposes of God would be revealed to them in Christ even as he fulfilled them!

This is the only gospel where we read about the intervening years of Jesus life, between his birth and his baptism. It is also helpful to be reminded that Jesus did not jump from 6 weeks to 30 years old, but that he “grew in wisdom and stature” (v52)!

### **Ministry in Galilee (3 - 9v50)**

Chapter 3 begins about thirty years later (3v23) with the ministry of John the Baptist. Luke sees John as the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 40v3-5) – he is the precursor to the coming of the Messiah. But, unlike his fellow gospel writers, Luke extends the quotation from Isaiah, pointing out that ultimately, “*all mankind* will see God's salvation” (Luke 3v6).

Jesus' baptism signals the start of his ministry. This is followed by his genealogy. Like Matthew's (Matthew 1v1-17), Luke's version of the family tree shows that Jesus is a Jew of the tribe of Judah, and he is of the royal line of King David. But Luke goes further - he traces Jesus' lineage back to Adam. Jesus is not just a member of the Jewish race, but of the human race - he is identified with the whole of humanity. This is emphasised again when he is tempted (4v1-13) – he goes through what we go through, but to a far greater degree. On his return to Galilee, Jesus announces his ministry by claiming the words of Isaiah 61v1-2 (4v18-21), but his hearers soon become angry when he gives another hint of the scope of the gospel (4v23-30).

Over the rest of this section we see a mixture of teaching and actions. The teaching is concentrated in two blocks. In chapter 6v17-49 there is the “Sermon on the Plain” which is very similar to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. The sermon begins with a list of blessings (v20-23) and a list of woes (24-26). These lists are shocking in themselves, but taken together they show a complete reversal of the positions of the rich and the poor in the kingdom. This is elaborated in what follows, where Jesus explains how their actions and attitudes are to be based on grace and mercy, because this is what God is like. The point seems to be as much about the radical goodness of God as it is about changing their behaviour.

The other main section of teaching is in 8v1-21, and concerns Jesus' message and mission. He tells the parable of the sower, and explains it to his disciples, telling them that not everyone will be able to understand his message. Those who do will come to understand even more of the truth (v16-18).

Many of the miracles reported in Luke involve healing. There are various reasons why this might be so. Luke was a doctor – he was probably more interested in these, and perhaps felt more qualified to report on them. They were perhaps also more easily verifiable. Luke also seems to have seen physical healing as an illustration of the spiritual healing Jesus brought. 5v17-26 shows this link - Jesus' first concern is the paralytic man's sins. He then deals with the physical problem to demonstrate his authority in forgiving sin.

Chapter 7 involves two remarkable accounts of miraculous healing. One is the servant of a Roman soldier, part of the hated occupying forces (7v1-10). The soldier clearly recognises Jesus' authority (v8), and possesses a level of understanding unreached by anyone in Israel (v9). Then Jesus heals a widow's son, bringing him back from the dead (v11-17). The people begin to recognise Jesus' importance, although they believe he is a prophet (v16).

But while he had compassion on such people and healed them, Luke is careful to point out that this was not Jesus' primary mission: “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent” (4v43). *Might this be helpful in thinking through our approach to evangelism and/or social action?*

One other important observation in this section is the people who were with Jesus. Throughout this section Jesus gather followers who accompany him on the next section of his journey. At the start of chapter 5 he calls the first disciples to join him. With a miraculous catch of fish he demonstrates his Lordship to Simon, James and John, and he explains that their new role will be to “catch men” (5v10). To this group of uneducated fisherman he also adds Levi, a hated tax collector (5v27-32), and eventually the rest of the twelve (6v12-16). The opening of chapter 8 tells us that the twelve were with him, but he there was another group – he was supported by a large group of women. They were from varied backgrounds, but they were an important part of Jesus' ministry. It is likely they benefited from Jesus' teaching too (we see this happening in 10v39 as Martha listens to his words). *Luke surely explodes any ideas that Jesus was sexist?!*

This section builds to the point where Peter is able to confess that Jesus is “the Messiah of God” (9v20), and he begins to talk about his impending death. And then Peter, along with James and John, witnesses the transfiguration – a visible revelation of the truth Peter has already confessed (v28-36).

### **Journey to Jerusalem (9v51 - 19v27)**

Once the disciples have understood who it is they are following, Jesus turns resolutely to Jerusalem. These chapters describe the gradual journey towards Jerusalem. It involves an escalation of the work, with Jesus sending out the 72 in chapter 10. They go with his authority, preaching the same message. But he is careful to tell them that it is not their new authority which should please them, but their place in God's kingdom (v20).

Jesus gives some stern warnings in this section, but they are not what we would necessarily expect. He has a lot to say to Pharisees and to all those who pride themselves on being religious. The harshest example is in chapter 11, where he pronounces six 'woes', all aimed at such people. He highlights the disparity between their outward actions and their hearts. This is restated in chapter 15, in the parable of the lost sons (15v11-32). One son is lost in sin and debauchery but is welcomed back in by the father. The other son remains outside, because his relationship is not

based on love but on actions and service (i.e. religion). He is similarly harsh in 18v9-14. Jesus is fiercely critical of religion, because it stops people entering the kingdom, both for the Pharisees themselves and for those they obstruct. And so Jesus also criticises them publicly: “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy” (12v1). *Are we ever guilty of this attitude?*

There are also several warnings to the rich, and wealth is highlighted as another barrier to people entering the kingdom. Such warnings occur in 12v13-21, 16v19-31, and 18v18-30. These are summed up in 18v25: “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” Those who put their trust in earthly wealth will not respond to God's salvation. Yet there is hope: “what is impossible with men is possible with God” (v27). God can still change the hearts of the rich, and in chapter 19 we are presented with a clear example of this; Zacchaeus the tax-collector responds to Jesus by giving away his wealth – the change in his priorities is obvious. *Are we also in danger of falling into this trap?*

The other main feature of this section is the repeated reference to future events, which is understandable given that Jesus is heading to Jerusalem. He speaks of what will happen to his followers, telling them that life will be hard for them (e.g. in 9v57-62, 12v4-12, 49-53, 14v25-35). He also looks towards the end times, and instructs them in how to live in the meantime (e.g. 12v35-48, 17v20-37). The news is not all bad though – the parables of the yeast and the mustard seed explain that the kingdom *will* grow, even in difficult circumstances (a fact we should bear in mind as we think about the state of the church).

And again in this section is the underlying theme that the gospel is open to all, regardless of our expectations. The parables of the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost sons (ch15) make the point very clear – God is concerned for the lost. Parables like the great banquet also make this point – although the Jews have, on the whole, rejected the coming of the kingdom, the way is open for all who would come in from outside, as long as their hearts are right (14v15-24). Jesus goes out of his way to reach people like the lepers (17v11-19), the crippled woman (who was healed on the Sabbath) (10-17), and Zacchaeus (19v1-10).

### **Teaching in Jerusalem (19v28 - ch21)**

In chapter 19, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem. He rides into the city on a donkey, with the crowd of disciples singing out. He goes to the temple, drives out those who are selling, and begins to teach there (v45-47). The Pharisees and priests attempted to kill him but couldn't, and their attempts to challenge his authority failed (20v1-8).

Jesus' opponents attempt to catch him out. In 20v20-40, they ask theological questions designed to show his message as politically sensitive (v20-26) or just stupid (v27-40). They fail (v40).

All of Jesus' teaching in this section happens in the temple, and seems to be aimed at the Jews (although it is still significant to the Gentile on-looker). He highlights the inability of the Jewish people to understand what is going on (e.g. 20v9-19, and 41-47) – they should have understood it, but could not. He also delivers another terrifying lecture about the “end of the age” (21v5-36). He explains that the approach of the end will be obvious as there will be signs, all of them unpleasant, particularly for the Jewish people (v20-24). But there is a glimmer of hope in the middle: Jesus himself is at the centre of it all (v27), and even though the signs are terrible, the end will be the redemption they are waiting for (v28).

### **The End? (22 – 24)**

As the passover approaches, Judas agrees to betray Jesus (22v16). Then Jesus and the apostles celebrate the passover together, which he gives new significance as he uses it to explain what his death will achieve. An argument breaks out about who will be the greatest, and Jesus takes the opportunity to teach them again about the upside-down nature of the kingdom – a lesson which has even more impact when considered in the light of the sacrifice Jesus is about to make. They will be given thrones in the kingdom, but greatness in the kingdom is a matter of service and sacrifice. Then Jesus breaks the news to Peter that he will betray Jesus (22v34). Finally, they set out for the Mount of Olives, where Jesus prays (v41).

A crowd arrives, led by Judas, and Jesus is arrested. They take him to the house of the high priest, where he is mocked and beaten. While he waits for his trial, Peter is recognised outside, but disowns Jesus three times and leaves.

Jesus is questioned by the council of elders, and he tells them that he is the Son of God (v70). This is enough to condemn him, so they lead him to Pilate, the governor. Jesus is passed from Pilate to Herod, and back to Pilate. Pilate finds no reason to execute him, but he ultimately bows to public pressure and allows Jesus to be crucified (23v25). He is led away, mocked and ridiculed, and crucified between two criminals (v33). Even on the cross, the scope of the gospel is clear, as one of the men shows his trust in Jesus, and is guaranteed a place in the kingdom (v43).

Eventually, Jesus dies. His death is accompanied by darkness, a sign of God's judgement, and the tearing of the temple curtain, which had until this point separated humans from God's presence (v45). His body is taken down, wrapped in linen and laid in a tomb donated by Joseph of Arimathea. The women who had witnessed his death also witness his burial (v55).

Those same women return after the Sabbath bringing spices (24v1). The tomb is not as they left it – it is empty. While they are in the tomb, two men (angels) appear and tell them that Jesus has risen. They remind them of the end of Jesus prediction “The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men; be crucified *and on the third day be raised again*” (v7) – at this point, his meaning is suddenly obvious! Taking another key role in the story, the women return and tell the disciples what they have seen. The men do not believe them, except for Peter. The one who had denied Jesus is the one to believe the women and run to the team (v12).

Jesus later appears to two disciples on the road to Emmaus (although they do not recognise him). They explain everything that has happened – their disappointment and their confusion are both clear. So Jesus explains what has happened (v25-26). Then he eats with them, celebrating the “fulfilled Passover” promised in 22v16, and they recognise him. The news soon spreads to the other disciples.

Luke's gospel ends with Jesus revealing himself to the disciples (24v36-43). He proves his identity to them, and proves that he is not a ghost – he has flesh and bones (v39). He leaves them with a with the reminder that they are to preach repentance and forgiveness to the world, and that he will send them a gift to help them (we find out what 'it' is in volume two!). Then he leads them out, blesses them and is taken up to heaven before their eyes, leaving the disciples to return to Jerusalem worshipping with great joy, and ready to embark on the work he has left them to do.

## **Learning from Luke**

### *The Gospel brings healing*

In Greek, 'healing' and 'salvation' are the same word. Luke probably saw the connection. He would have understood that Jesus was capable of healing at a much deeper and more significant level than he was, even with his medical training. There are at least 25 specific instances of healing in Luke's

account, plus references to many others being healed (4v40-41). But Luke is also careful to point out the true source of healing (in both Luke and Acts). It is only through Christ that we are healed of our greatest need, our separation from God. The healing of the paralytic in 5v17-26 is a clear illustration of this, and Jesus' words to Levi probably had special significance to Luke, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (5v31).

### *The Gospel is for everyone*

In Luke's day, it would probably have been assumed that the rich, the healthy and the powerful could expect access to the kingdom. These things were seen as signs of blessing and God's favour. But Luke shows that this life-changing, sin-healing gospel is for everyone.

Luke chose his examples carefully (presumably there were lots more he could have mentioned instead). The people he chose to focus on demonstrated that the kingdom was open to all, regardless of sex, race, reputation or social status. And they were also subversive. They showed that commonly held ideas of what made someone 'good' were wrong.

This should firstly make us grateful. It is only by the grace of God that we come under the offer of the gospel. For Jews, it is through Christ that the promises of God are fulfilled. For Gentiles, it is only through Christ that those fulfilled promises apply to us at all.

Do we think in these 'upside down' terms? Are there some people we (even subconsciously) think of as beyond the reach of the gospel? We may not have issues with Romans or women, but what about the poor? Or Muslims? Or homosexual people? Or atheists? All these people need the gospel. And the message of Luke is that the gospel is for them as much as it is for us.

What do we need to do to make sure they hear it?

### *The Gospel is to be passed on*

Given what Luke teaches in his gospel, it should be impossible to simply read it and then put it to one side. Luke is not simply documenting history – he intends that others should have their lives changed by the Jesus he's talking about.

As in Matthew and John, Luke features a commissioning of the disciples. Just before the ascension, Jesus tells them "repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (24v47).

Luke seems to intentionally leave the commission hanging in the air as Jesus ascends to heaven. He no doubt had his sequel in mind as he finished the gospel, and the commission and ascension are used as the bridging point between Luke and Acts. But the same detail serves different functions in the two books. In Acts, the commission is the foundation – the book picks up the story from this point and shows the disciples going out and fulfilling it. But at the end of volume 1, the commission is the finishing touch; now that Jesus' work is complete, the disciples are presented with theirs. The gospel is to be proclaimed. And, having followed them on their journey, the reader cannot put the book down unchanged. Once we have followed Jesus through the gospel, just as the disciples did, their call becomes **our call too**. The great news is, of course, that we do not have to wait for the Holy Spirit – he is already here!

So we have to ask the question: what is our part in this? And we need to be challenged by the radical, upside-down nature of the gospel as presented by Luke. It will require us to 'get our hands dirty.' Can we really believe that this call to mission only applies to others? And can this kind of gospel be restricted to people or groups we like?