

# THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE

## INTRODUCTION

Luke's gospel is the most historically conscious and the most literary mature of the gospels. The gospel is part one of a two-part work (part two being the Acts of the Apostles). It describes God's intervention in the world in order to open up a path of salvation (wholeness) for a world caught up in destructive cycles of conflict and violence causing suffering, destitution and death. The gospel (part one) describes this intervention of God through the coming of Jesus, and Acts (part two) describes God's intervention by the coming of the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of Jesus) through the church. In Luke, Jesus' mission moves from Galilee to Jerusalem - the centre of the Jewish faith. In Acts, the mission of the apostles and the early Christians moves from Jerusalem to Rome - the centre of the world in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

The gospel of Luke follows the journey of Jesus empowered by the Holy Spirit. Geographically he journeys from Galilee to Jerusalem, physically he journeys from the desert to the cross, spiritually he journeys from temptation to clarity of discernment of his divine path, and as a person he journeys through life and death to resurrection. Through the eyes and words of the gospel, we are also invited to discover faith and hope that God's love will transform us through every twist and turn on our own life journey. What will following Jesus look like in our own lives?

## DATE AND AUTHORSHIP

- The quality of the Greek text suggests a skilled literary artist.
- It was probably written after the fall of Jerusalem (70 AD), and the majority of scholars suggest 80-85 AD.

## STRUCTURE

Luke's literary skill is matched by a carefully thought-out structure.

- 1-2 contain the birth narratives and function as a prologue
- 3-4 set the stage for Jesus' adult ministry

The main body contains 2 divisions.

4:14 - 9:50 - Galilean ministry

9:51 - 19:28 - Journey to Jerusalem (the action moves deliberately and intentionally toward Jerusalem and the cross)

19:29 - 23:56 - The dramatic conclusion focuses on Jesus in Jerusalem, his crucifixion and burial.

24 - functions as Epilogue and tells what happened to Jesus after his death. In addition, through the commissioning of his disciples it points ahead to the book of Acts which will continue the story of the mission of the church.

## MAJOR THEMES

- The coming of Jesus fulfills God's great plan to save the world. Jesus demonstrates that he is the fulfillment of God's plan in concrete ways. This includes his compassion for the poor and outcast, and his concern for righteousness/justice (the flip side of which is convicting the world of its sin and injustice).
- Jesus has come to bring the salvation of God to all people - Jew and Gentile.
- Salvation is about spiritual liberation and transformation. It begins with Israel, but already with Jesus begins to spread to the larger world beyond Israel.
- Luke's gospel is also a call to mission. As Jesus is sent to the poor and outcast, sick and sinners, so the disciples are sent. As Jesus is sent to embrace the suffering world as a divine instrument of healing compassion, so the disciples are sent. As Jesus is empowered and anchored by God's Holy Spirit, so the disciples are empowered and anchored.
- And thus, the mission of the church today is to continue the work begun in Galilee, carried to Jerusalem, and extended to Rome which represents the wider world (as we will see in the Acts of the Apostles). As Jesus incarnates God's love (forgiveness/acceptance/compassion) so his disciples today are called and empowered to incarnate this same love of God.
- Every gospel has distinctive themes and emphases of Jesus' ministry they highlight. Luke is concerned with issues of status, wealth versus poverty, the importance of women as witnesses in a world ruled by men, the importance of the Holy Spirit from first to last, and the power of forgiveness to build bridges in a world of severe conflict and divisions based on race, class, gender, disability, etc.

## LUKE 1-2

In these opening chapters, Luke tells of the Holy Spirit's invasion into the lives of an elderly couple (Zechariah and Elizabeth), a young Girl (Mary), lowly shepherds, an old man of prayer (Simeon), and a prophetess (Anna).

God's great plan to save the world is revealed to the humble and lowly of God's people. The fact that women are recipients of this revelation equally with men also contributes to the message that God comes to the humble not the proud and important according to the world's measure. With humility comes a greater openness, and both humility and openness are essential foundations of faith. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to raise simple, common lives into channels of grace and healing transformation.

### Luke 1: 5-24

Zechariah experiences a divine visitation while he is in the temple, the Holy of holies, fulfilling his duty as priest. An angel of the Lord appears (Gabriel) and tells him that he and his wife will have a child in their old age. The Holy Spirit will be involved in this. The child's role will be to prepare the way. He will have the spirit and power of Elijah (It was popular belief that Elijah, the first great prophet of Israel, would re-appear to proclaim the coming of the Messiah). Because Zechariah questions the possibility of this happening, he is struck with muteness, until the child is actually born.

### Luke 1: 26-38

The angel Gabriel then appears to Mary, a young teenager living in the northern Galilean town of Nazareth. Why is she chosen? Her response to the dream says it all: she was believing, receptive and accepting. She didn't know what it would all mean, but she was open, ready and willing to play her role, whatever it would be.

### Luke 1: 39-56

Mary and Elizabeth (John's mother) are relatives. This means Jesus and John are cousins, something we only come to know in this gospel account. The relationship between John and Jesus starts even in conception when John acknowledges Jesus and begins to bear witness and prepare the way.

Mary's song (the Magnificat) is beautiful. But it speaks as if God has already accomplished a reversal of fortunes where the rich and powerful will be dislodged from their tyrannous rule and those who are destitute and down-trodden will be vindicated and refreshed. Perhaps it is intended to be read like the Lord's prayer: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Perhaps it is a glimpse of God's future invading the present. If the rich and powerful believed Mary's vision, they would change their ways in anticipation of God changing it in time. Maybe it's also a call to action for the faithful, to bear witness to balancing the inequity in the world through their own living, advocating, protesting and giving.

Luke 1: 57-80

John is born, Zechariah receives his speech back, and he proclaims a beautiful prophecy about John and the messiah to come.

Luke 2: 1-20

Mary and Joseph make the trip to Bethlehem while Mary is pregnant. The reason is for taxation purposes. Bethlehem is Joseph's hometown and it is the town of King David. The candidate for messiah must be of the lineage of David and Joseph serves that purpose as Jesus' earthly father.

Not only is Jesus born to poor parents and under impoverished circumstances, but the fact that God's revelation through angels comes to shepherds also reinforces the theme already articulated in the Magnificat. God is working through the lowly, not the powerful, those who are humble and are looking for hope, not those who are self-satisfied, comfortable and not interested in changing the order of things. Shepherds are low-class workers, just the kind of people God chooses to fulfill the divine plan.

Luke 2: 22-28

Both Simeon and Anna represent humble, vulnerable Israelites who are looking for the 'consolation of Israel.' (25) Upon seeing the child Simeon praises God singing what has been called the Benedictus (master, now you are 'dismissing' your servant in peace...). The prophecy points not only to Jesus role as Messiah and savior, but also to his rejection by the rulers of Israel and the suffering to come. Anna also praises God and starts telling people around about him. Both Simeon and Anna, like John in Elizabeth's womb, angels and shepherds, are all witnesses of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' identity.

Luke 2: 21-52

2:21-24 – Whereas in Matthew's account, Joseph takes Mary and Jesus and flees to Egypt to escape Herod, in Luke's account, the family remain in Bethlehem until the 8<sup>th</sup> day when they make the trip to the temple in Jerusalem, to have Jesus circumcised according to tradition. Joseph and Mary are good Jews and Jesus grows up a good Jew. Why is this important? Not only does it fulfill prophecy in that Jesus continues to be an eligible candidate for Messiah, but it accentuates the injustice of the religious authorities who will be against him. As we have already discerned from the Magnificat (1:46-55), God has chosen to side with humble, downtrodden Israel, over against the powerful and wealthy (which include religious authorities who are sold to the greed and power of Rome). They care to retain their own control and privilege rather than pursue justice and compassion for their people. The religious authorities are supposed to steward the faith entrusted to them not use it as a hammer to keep the people under control through guilt, shame and the threat of judgement and damnation.

2:25-35 – Simeon, like Mary and Joseph, also represents humble Israel. His hope and prayers are for the ‘consolation of Israel’. Simeon recognizes in Jesus God’s promise of deliverance and we are told it is the Holy Spirit that gives him the insight to recognize Jesus as the Christ (Messiah). He offers his poetic prophecy (known as the ‘Benedictus’ in Christian tradition) which speaks of hope to be fulfilled in Jesus. This hope is not just for Israel but for the whole world. Luke is interested in those aspects of the story of Jesus that point to universal fulfillment beyond the Jewish nation. Clearly this gospel is aimed at a gentile audience.

But Simeon also offers more words to Mary in vs 33ff. He speaks about the trouble and opposition Jesus will face and how all this will cause pain in Mary’s heart. Clearly this gospel account is taking care to tell the story from Mary’s point of view.

2: 36-38 – Anna is named as another devout, humble Jew, a prophetess. She also recognizes in Jesus God’s salvation and deliverance, and she begins to tell others about him.

2:39-40 – The family return to their home in Nazareth and Jesus grows up a good Jewish boy.

2: 41-52 – Here we encounter Jesus as a 12 year old boy as he comes with his parents to Jerusalem and the temple during some religious festival. He gets so immersed in discussion with religious teachers in the temple that his parents forget about him and begin their trip back north to Nazareth without him. They are probably part of a convoy of travelers and so it would be easy to miss Jesus. They return to find him still in the temple. Why is this story here? Clearly, Jesus’ rebuke of his parents, even at 12, that he must be ‘in his Father’s house’, already foreshadows his self-understanding as being connected with God in a personal and unique way. It could be interpreted as an arrogant and inconsiderate statement to his parents who are rightly concerned about his welfare, unless, of course, he is someone unique and special.