

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 20

Luke – Part One

Overview

I. INTRODUCTION

Who was Luke?

The author of Luke, our third gospel, does not identify himself by name. We learn of Luke indirectly from his writings (the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles) and from the writings of Paul. Paul references Luke three times – as a “fellow worker” in Philemon 24; as “Luke” in 2 Timothy 4:11; and as “our dear friend Luke, the doctor” in Colossians 4:14.

Reading the books show no surprise that Luke was a doctor. In addition to his careful attention to detail and his similar careful research, we have a special attention paid to the illnesses of the sick throughout the writings.

The books also tell us a bit about Luke’s life. In Acts, the writing transposes at places from third person to first person plural. These are frequently called the “we” sections of Acts. Where Luke usually writes about what Paul was doing, or what Peter and others were doing, there are times when Luke joined Paul and the references become what “we” were doing rather than “they.”

The first “we” section is in Acts 11:28 in Antioch, the town that history tells us is Luke’s home. The church had been established at Antioch several verses earlier, noting that the preaching of Jesus was not only to Jews but also to Greeks. This is significant because Luke was a Greek, not a Jew. Although not apparent in the New International Version, the Greek construction for the meeting that is described in 11:28 (a “genitive absolute”) states that Luke himself was present at the meeting.

Antioch was where Luke would have most likely met Paul. Acts tells us that Paul was there for a whole year before this meeting in verse 28. Antioch was also the city for a famous medical school at the time which makes sense with Luke.

The second “we” passage starts up with Acts 16. The chapter starts with Luke writing that “Paul” came to Lystra where “he” was joined by

Timothy. Then, “they” traveled from town to town. However, in verse 10 the “theys” change to “we.” Luke writes, “We got ready at once to leave for Macedonia.” Then, “we put out to sea...” This “we” language continues through most of the chapter.

The third “we” passages begins in Acts 20. There, we see Luke joining Paul and his companions for the end of the third missionary journey on to Paul’s confinement in Rome.

Interesting in these sections is the indications of the time Luke would have spent with Mark. Philemon 24 shows that Luke and Mark were with Paul in Rome. Mark is also mentioned alongside Luke in the Colossians passage. When we covered Mark’s gospel, we noted that there was definite awareness of either Mark with Luke or, most likely, Luke with Mark. We see how that makes sense. These two co-workers would no doubt share their gospels with each other.

How do we know Luke wrote the gospel?

We do not have a photograph of Luke writing the gospel, nor do we have his registering a copyright for the piece. On what, then, do we make the statement that Luke was the writer? Mainly church history. The title we read in the Greek “According to Luke” is so ancient we cannot place it. Similarly, the early church fathers are all in agreement that Luke was the author. Justin Martyr (born around 100) repeatedly quotes Luke’s gospel (*Dialogue with Trypho*). Irenaeus (who lived from about 115 to 190) says, “Luke, the follower of Paul, preserved in a book the gospel which that apostle preached.” *Against Heresy* 3:4. Many others wrote similarly over the years.

When was the gospel written?

This question is somewhat open to debate. As noted above, the gospel is the start of what was a two scroll project for Luke, the second being Acts. Acts ends at what many consider an unusual point with Paul in prison in Rome some time before Paul’s martyrdom. These scholars reason that the Acts ending point is the time that Luke wrote thinking that had Luke written later, Luke would not have left Paul’s death out. Paul reached Rome around 60, so that would put the writing then. Other scholars opt for a later date.

Why did Luke write?

We do not have a full and clear answer from Luke on this question. We do, however, have some good directions that point us to an answer. First, we see that Luke was writing to “Theophilus,” a man of some notoriety according to 1:3-4 where Luke says “I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”

We also know from reading the gospel that Luke was principally concerned with conveying the gospel message to Greeks/Gentiles. While we see in Matthew the Jewish gospel, we see in Luke the opposite. Luke rarely quotes the Old Testament, and when he does, it is always the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament.

As we see Luke on various missionary endeavors of Paul among the Gentiles, it is logical and expected that Luke would see the need for a gospel targeting these people. Luke’s gospel hits the theme harder than the others that the good news was to “all the people” (2:10). This point will be driven home over and over in the gospel.

What are the main points of Luke?

Luke takes the gospel from the isolated birth of Jesus in the small village of Bethlehem and follows its expansion all the way to the borders of the known world within a generation. In doing so, Luke points out Jesus as mankind’s redeemer, not merely the redeemer of the Jews.

Luke also gives a full view of Jesus as human as well as divine. Luke’s account of the birth and childhood of Jesus is more thorough and detailed than any of the other gospels.

Luke also references Jesus praying much more so than any of the other gospels (11 times in Luke, while only 3 in Matthew and 4 in Mark and John.)

Luke has the dominant passages of praise, thanksgiving and blessing compared to the other gospels. One finds many pieces of choral music from the verses of Luke’s gospel.

Luke excels beyond the other gospels in the quality of the written Greek. Luke has a much more extensive vocabulary and his diction is first rate.

Finally, we should note that Luke pays more attention and writes with greater passion about children and women compared to the other gospels.

II. THE STORY

How does Luke tell the story?

Luke tells the story in five expanding sections. Luke starts at a small point, and like ripples from a stone thrown into a pond, we see the expansion outward:

1. Christ's infancy and childhood
2. Jesus in Galilee
3. Jesus facing Jerusalem
4. Jesus in Jerusalem
5. The passion

1. Infancy and Childhood

After first setting out the purpose of his writing (1:1-4), Luke starts the narrative of Christ's infancy with an angelic visit to a priest named Zechariah. Both Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were descendants of Aaron and were "upright" before God. Elizabeth was barren and, like Zechariah, was "well along in years."

While Zechariah was serving as priest, an angel appeared to him and told him Elizabeth was to give birth to a son to be named John. "Many" would rejoice at the birth of this boy who was to be filled with God's spirit from birth. Gabriel, the angel, confirmed this saying John would proceed in the spirit of Elijah to turn hearts back to God. Age caused Zechariah to question the accuracy of Gabriel's promise. The result was a silencing of Zechariah for the remainder of the pregnancy! Zechariah became adept at sign language and writing!

Six months later, God sends Gabriel to Nazareth to the Virgin Mary. Mary is told not to fear, but that God has found favor with her. Mary is told that despite her virginity, the Holy Spirit would conceive within her the Son of the Most High. The angel suggests

proof of God's ability to do the impossible by informing Mary that her barren aged relative Elizabeth was set to have a child in three short months.

Mary accepts the word of the Lord and heads to visit with Elizabeth. John leaps in Elizabeth's womb as Elizabeth blesses Mary, the "mother of my Lord." Mary then glorifies God in a verse that is called the *Magnificat*, after the first word in the Latin version of the song.

When John was born and circumcised, the naming ritual took place. Through writing, Zechariah indicated the baby was to be named "John," and at that point, Zechariah began to speak. He did so with verse that is called *Benedictus* after the first Latin word in the song praising God for the promises set to be fulfilled through John and the coming Messiah. Thus ends Luke 1.

In Luke 2, we have the birth of Jesus. Luke tells of the census that sent Joseph and the pregnant Mary to Bethlehem. While there, Jesus is born in a manger, there being no room at the inn.

Shepherds in nearby fields get an angelic appearance that informs them of the birth of a Savior for "all the people" (2:10). A heavenly host begins singing "Glory to God in the highest" and the shepherds head to Bethlehem to see what was going on. The shepherds found Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes as proclaimed. After recounting the angelic visitation, the shepherds went on telling others the story. Mary heard the shepherds and stored up the words thinking about their meaning in her heart.

On the eighth day, Jesus was circumcised and named. The parents then took Jesus to Jerusalem to dedicate him to the Lord. While there, a devout and righteous old man named Simeon was moved by the spirit to hold Jesus in his arms and praise God with what has been known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, after the first two Latin words to the "Sovereign Lord." Simeon prophesies that Jesus will not only be the cause of the rising and falling of many Jews, but would also be a reason a sword would pierce Mary's soul as well. Another prophet, an old woman named Anna, also prophesied over Jesus as the redemption of Jerusalem.

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus eventually return to settle in Nazareth where Jesus grew, became strong, was filled with wisdom and the grace of God.

Each year, Jesus and family would trek to Jerusalem for Passover. When Jesus was 12, the family accidentally left Jesus, thinking he was among friends and family in the caravan. Upon a three-day return, Jesus was found in the temple holding court with the teachers. Jesus answered his mother's worries with a simple explanation that they should expect Jesus to be in his Father's house.

Chapter two ends with Jesus' obedience to his parents noted as well as his growth in wisdom and stature and favor with God and man. Mary is again noted as treasuring these things in her heart.

Chapter three gives us John the Baptist going throughout the country preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Isaiah is quoted as the prophesy detailing John as a voice crying in the desert, "prepare the way for the Lord."

As John baptizes, he also teaches people to walk more holy before God as they interact with their neighbors. While some thought John might be the Messiah, John was careful to teach that one would follow him whose sandals John was not worthy to tie.

John's life was not easy street. At one point, Herod locked him in prison. Still, John was the one who baptized Jesus. At the baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaimed Jesus as "my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (3:22).

John ends chapter three taking Jesus' geneology back to Adam. This differs from Matthew where the ancestry is taken back to Abraham, the father of the Jews. Luke shows Jesus' heritage with all mankind, beyond merely Jews.

From the old people past childbearing age, to the young not yet in circumstances of life that could lead to conception, God was at work to bring about the redemption of mankind.

This first section of Luke sets out Jesus as fully human and fully divine. Jesus is descended from Adam, the father of all living people. Jesus is “good news of great joy that will be for **all** the people” (2:10). The angels see Jesus as bringing peace on earth to men, regardless of nationality or race (2:14). As Simeon prophesied, Jesus was messiah not only to Israel, but the salvation reached further with Jesus “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” as well (3:32). John the Baptist precedes Jesus with the ministry promise that “all mankind will see God’s salvation” (3:6).

In fact, John explains that ancestry from Abraham is something God can accomplish through rocks. It certainly was not the end goal of life.

These were not random stories, but well researched accounts that Luke worked to procure and verify. This friend and companion of Paul, Mark, and by implication Peter and others, put together a gospel that would accompany not only Theophilus, but any Gentile reader who wants to learn of the life of Jesus.

This infancy/childhood section of Luke ends here.

2. *Galilean Ministry (Luke 4–9:50)*

Luke recounts Jesus in the wilderness fasting for forty days followed by the temptations from Satan. Following those, Luke notes that Jesus “returned to Galilee in the power of the spirit” teaching in the synagogues. Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus, was none too receptive. Jesus went into the synagogue and read from Isaiah 61:1-2 and explained that Isaiah's prophesy of good news to the poor and sight for the blind was fulfilled in Jesus. The people did not see Jesus as anything beyond the son of Joseph causing Jesus to exclaim that “no prophet is accepted in his hometown.” Jesus then left town with a number angry with him.

Luke has placed this story at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in a way that will show Jesus in victory over Satan (the temptations), yet unsung as a Savior by his own hometown. From there, Jesus begins to go out. Remember the ultimate purpose of this gospel is to show the salvation to the larger Greek world. It will become a pattern that Jesus is rejected in ways that extend his reach rather than curtail it.

Jesus left his hometown and Luke takes us to Capernaum where we see Jesus teaching on the Sabbath. A demon-possessed man in the synagogue calls out Jesus as the Holy One and Jesus casts the demon out. The people are amazed at the authority and power of Jesus. Jesus then goes into Peter's home and heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Many others are brought to Jesus and he heals them as well, continuing to preach throughout the synagogues of Judea.

Jesus' miracles did not stop there. Jesus instructed Simon after a frustrating night of unsuccessful fishing with a miraculous catch. James and John were fishing partners of Simon's and shared in the experience. Jesus called the three to leave their boats and follow Jesus to be fishers of men. From these humble beginnings fresh off a night of fruitless fishing, these three left everything and went with Jesus to change the world.

Jesus was a crowd magnet because of his miraculous healings. Jesus heals a leper with an instruction to tell no one yet word of Jesus still spread like wildfire. Luke underlines that Jesus would often withdraw to a solitary place to pray with God.

Luke tells of Jesus surrounded by Pharisees and teachers of the law when a sick man is put before Jesus through the roof by the sick fellow's friends. It seemed the only way to get the fellow through the crowd. Jesus heals the man by pronouncing his sins forgiven. The religious folks thought Jesus blasphemous with the forgiveness pronouncement, and Jesus addressed their unvoiced concerns explaining that forgiveness of sins, like healing, was within the scope of Jesus' authority.

Jesus then calls Levi (Matthew), the tax collector, to follow him as well as the three already chosen. Matthew does so, but first throws a large banquet in Jesus' behalf. Jesus attends with a large crowd of "tax collectors," notorious among Jews as sinners who interacted with the Gentile unholy people and government. Jesus reaches out to those outcast from Judaism with the explanation, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (5:31). These words certainly would have rung true for the physician Luke!

When the religious continue to question this radical approach of Jesus to living the Jewish faith, Jesus explains that new wine must be put into new wineskins for old wineskins would burst.

Luke flows from this teaching of Jesus into the time where Jesus' disciples picked some kernels of wheat for a snack while walking through grain fields on the Sabbath. When questioned about it by the Pharisees, Jesus explained himself as the Lord of the Sabbath. The disciples were not out of line. Luke then gives the story of Jesus healing a man's hand on the Sabbath. Before healing the hand, Jesus asked the scrutinizing Jewish leaders whether they considered it lawful to do good on the Sabbath. The leaders do not answer and so Jesus heals the man in front of their eyes. The leaders are furious at Jesus for this and begin discussing how to handle the problem Jesus was becoming.

We begin to see here that as Christ was rejected from Nazareth for no good reason, certain religious muckety-mucks from the towns in the surrounding Judean/Galilean countryside were turning against Jesus as well. Again, this anger and hostility is without any good cause. It will ultimately not squelch Jesus and what he was about. Rather, it will ultimately lead him further into a bigger arena as the good news continues its journey toward all nations.

Here, Luke gives the selection of the twelve apostles by Jesus. Luke follows this selection with the beatitudes and other teachings from the Sermon on the Mount. Luke records Jesus' teachings on loving and praying for your enemies, not judging or criticizing others, and building a solid house on a solid foundation.

At this point, we get our next glimpse of how Jesus and the gospel begin to burst the old wineskins of Judaism and flow out into the world at large. A Roman centurion had a highly valued sick servant that needed healing. The centurion had Jesus sought out to heal the man, but in the process, the Centurion would not have Jesus come into his house. The Centurion knew himself unworthy of Jesus. As a soldier, the Centurion was aware that authority was authority whether Jesus was under his roof or not. Jesus commented with amazement at the faith of the Centurion and the servant was healed.

Jesus kept going through the towns in the countryside. Coming upon a woman weeping for her dead son, Jesus in compassion stops, approaches the coffin, and raises the boy from the dead. The news of Jesus continued to get bigger and bigger, spreading "throughout Judea and the surrounding country" (7:17).

When John the Baptist got wind of all Jesus was doing, he sent two disciples to Jesus to verify that Jesus was, in fact, the expected Messiah. Before those two messengers, Jesus performed a number of miraculous healings. Jesus then sent them back to John with the instructions to pass on what they had seen: the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, the lame walking, the dead raised, and (in some ways the biggest news of all) good news being preached to the poor! Surely, it was as unusual then as now. Most would not be paying any attention to the needs of the poor lower rungs of society.

Jesus then spoke to those around him about John the Baptist. There was an irony that certain religious Jews were offended by John for his failure to socialize (eat bread or drink wine) and yet were equally offended by Jesus because he did socialize (eating and drinking).

One of the Pharisees invites Jesus to dinner and a sinful woman from the town crashes the dinner party with an alabaster jar of perfume. The woman cries over Jesus, wiping his feet with her tears and hair. The woman anoints Jesus' feet with the perfume to the inner dismay of the host. The host was thinking that Jesus was not all he was cracked up to be or Jesus would have known the woman was a sinner touching him. Rather than slap the man directly, Jesus asked him a simple question. Two men owed a fellow money. One owed a little; and one owed a lot. The moneylender forgave both their debts. Jesus wanted to know which man would have the greater gratitude for the debt forgiveness. The host answered that the man who large debt was forgiven would have the greater appreciation than the man forgiven a small debt. Jesus then hits the man directly with an explanation. The man did little for Jesus at the dinner in the house. The woman did much. The man felt he had little need for Jesus. The woman's need was great. Jesus then forgave the woman her sins, much to the dismay of the other guests.

As Jesus continued town to town, along with his disciples, Luke records a number of women have at this point joined the following of Jesus. Just as Jesus began in humble beginnings in Bethlehem enlarging his outreach from Nazareth to the surrounding countryside and eventually Jerusalem, the crown capital of Israel, so the following of Jesus has grown, from Jesus alone in the wilderness to the three, fishermen, to the twelve, to a larger crowd now including a number of women as well.

Jesus tells a large crowd a parable about four soil types and the different effect each soil has on seed. Jesus explains his meaning of the story to his disciples as an illustration of the various types of reception people have to the word of God. We see here that of four soil types, the message of God will only thrive and grow in one. Most are not ultimately receptive.

When Jesus is approached by his mother and brothers, they have difficulty getting through the crowd to visit with Jesus. Jesus uses this opportunity to explain that his true family goes beyond any genetic borders. Jesus is family to any who “hear God’s word and put it into practice” (8:21).

Jesus country ministry continues with him calming the storm and the fears of his disciples in the boat. Jesus then exercises authority over a legion of demons inhabiting a poor man from the Gerasenes. The demons are permitted to go into a herd of pigs, which then hurdle down a steep bank into a lake where they drown. The townspeople did not want Jesus in their area and asked Jesus to leave. The healed man wants to go with Jesus, but Jesus leaves the man to spread the news of God at work.

Jesus then sets about to heal the daughter of a synagogue ruler named Jairus when a bleeding woman sneaks in to touch Jesus’ cloak in hopes of a miracle. The woman gets her miracle, but not with the anonymity she hoped for. Jesus singles her out with an encouraging word of peace and faith, then sets about to Jairus’s daughter. Word comes in that the daughter is dead, but Jesus is undeterred. Jesus raises the daughter back from the dead with an instruction “not to tell anyone” (8:56).

Before the Galilean ministry is over in Luke, we have Jesus sending his twelve out to do work of their own for God. Luke then recounts that John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod, and we begin to see the end of this phase of the story as told by Luke. The apostles return to Jesus who then feeds the 5,000 miraculously, giving some idea of the large number of followers at this point in Jesus’ walk.

The countryside ministry is not complete without Luke recording Peter’s confession of Jesus as “the Christ of God” (9:20). At this point, Jesus predicts his ultimate death for the first time in Luke. And not just Jesus, but this gospel message that would spread around the world would be done so by those who would take up their cross

and follow Jesus. The message was for those who would deny themselves, setting their lives aside for the sake of a higher calling. Unfortunately, Jesus noted that not all would choose this route. In fact, some would not taste this death before seeing the kingdom of God. Those will be ashamed of Jesus on earth and will not then receive his glory in heaven. This is another indication like that of the soils. Not all are receptive to God's healing and message of redemption in Jesus.

Luke records the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountainside where God again affirms the work and ministry of Jesus. Like the baptism of Jesus earlier, this occurs on the cusp of Jesus expanding his ministry in a fresh direction.

Jesus heals a demon-possessed boy while explaining in the aftermath that the direction of his ministry is changing. For a second time, Jesus forecasts his coming death. Rather than appreciate what was happening, the disciples are spending their time arguing which is greatest and complaining to Jesus that some outside their group were also working on Jesus' behalf. Jesus sets them straight and then moves to the next ministry direction as he "resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (9:51).

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. God can start small and end big!
2. The gospel is an unstoppable force of God.
3. Not all want it.
4. Not all will live it.
5. But it is God's good news for all.