

Luke Part 1: INTRODUCTION

Hello, I'm Beth Worley and I had the joy of writing this study on the first nine or so chapters of the Gospel of Luke.

Many of us are probably familiar with certain bits of Luke's gospel. But did you realise it's been over 20 years since we last studied Luke in KYB? This three-part series on Luke will give you the opportunity to dig a little deeper, to be clearer on some details, and with the Holy Spirit's help, to see Jesus more clearly.

First, let's set the scene.

What was going on at the time Luke wrote?

By the time Luke wrote this account, it was probably some 30–40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Many of the people who knew Jesus personally were still alive — but they were getting old.

Luke often worked beside the apostle Paul in spreading the gospel. Paul preached that the Messiah had been crucified — which annoyed and offended many Jewish leaders. He also preached that Jesus had been raised to life again — which many non-Jews (Gentiles) thought was simply ridiculous — people like Festus, the governor of Judea (Acts 26:23–25).

So, is Jesus really the Messiah? Did he rise again?

Luke tells us he wrote so that Theophilus (probably his patron) — and any other readers, including people like us — could “*know the certainty of the things you have been taught*” (1:4). We don't have to guess. We don't have to speculate. We don't have to wonder. We can have full confidence that Jesus died and rose again.

Who was Luke?

Luke was a doctor and historian. It seems he never personally met Jesus in the flesh. But Luke knew many people who had met Jesus and knew him well — people like Peter, the disciple and apostle. And Luke was a valued co-worker of Paul's, serving alongside Paul, faithfully sharing the gospel. It's generally thought that Luke wrote this gospel under Paul's authority as an apostle.

We can't be certain if Luke was a Gentile (a non-Jew) who happened to know the Jewish Scriptures really well (we know he knew them because he often quoted them), or if Luke was a Jew who was very familiar with the Greek culture of the time. Most people lean towards him being a Gentile.

Luke wrote during the time of the *Roman* empire. So it might surprise you to learn that in Palestine back then, it was actually *Greek* language and culture that a wide range of people shared. For example, it was the language that helped everyone to communicate. As people moved around, the language of trade and commerce was not so much Latin; it was Greek — for Jews, Romans and others. That's why Luke's gospel (and the rest of the New Testament) was written in Greek. If you wanted a wide audience to understand your message at that

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time, you wrote or spoke in Greek. Some 300 years before, Alexander the Great had conquered a wide swathe of territory, and he brought Greek language and culture with him. And it stuck. Even the Jewish Scriptures had been translated into Greek a couple of hundred years before Jesus was born.

Rome held the political power, but Greek language and culture were widespread.

Why did Luke write?

According to Luke, there were lots of accounts of Jesus' life. But Luke wanted to get the story straight. So he researched *everything*. There were still living eyewitnesses, people who had personally seen Jesus, but they were getting old — people like the apostles. One day they'd be dead. So Luke personally investigated the *whole story*. For example, how did he know what had happened to Mary before Jesus was born? Many Bible scholars believe Luke probably interviewed her.

Luke wrote because he had a pastoral concern for people: he wanted them to be sure of their faith.

But Luke's gospel — like the other gospels — contains big claims about who Jesus is and what he did.

How do we know if a claim is true?

Anyone can make a grand *claim* about themselves or someone else. Think for a moment — ***or perhaps pause this recording and discuss this question***: how do we know if someone's claim *is true*?

When we weigh up whether someone's claim is true:

- We try to find witnesses.
- We consider the evidence.
- And we think about whether the explanation makes sense: does it account for the evidence?

This is what Luke did.

Anyone can make a *claim* about themselves or someone else. What matters is whether they can *back it up with evidence*.

So, in order to write his gospel, Luke talked to eye witnesses, he gathered evidence. He set it all out in an orderly account. Luke wanted to give us lots of evidence that Jesus is the Messiah, the one God had promised through the Old Testament. Jesus is God's Son.

Under Jewish law, you needed two or three witnesses to establish the truth of a claim about someone or something. Luke provides us with — not two or three — but witness, after witness, after witness: an old priest, an unborn baby, shepherds, an old widow — even angels (God's messengers) and God's own voice.

Luke gives us example, after example, after example of Jesus' power and authority — over sickness, blindness, nature, demons, and even death.

We don't have to wonder if the story about Jesus is true. Luke shows us it is.

Luke's gospel is volume one of the account of Jesus. It covers Jesus' birth, his life and teachings, and his death and resurrection. The book of Acts was also written by Luke. It is volume two. It covers what happened as a *result* of Jesus' life, death and resurrection — the formation of the early church. And this is where we also see that the claims about Jesus were true because they changed people's lives. People who were confused or hadn't believed in the resurrection at first (like the disciples) turned into people who died for their faith. Jesus *is* the Messiah. He *did* rise from the dead. *Nothing else* could account for the change in people's lives. The claims of the early church and the explanation about what happened *makes sense*.

This KYB study (Luke Part 1) looks at Jesus' birth and early ministry, up to the transfiguration.

Part 2 looks at more of Jesus' teaching as he moved around, with Jerusalem as his final goal.

Part 3 will cover Jesus' final teaching, his entry into Jerusalem, and his death and resurrection.

What does Luke's gospel give us that the other gospels don't?

Luke gives us a *lot* more detail, presumably from his in-depth research. For example, he ties the events of Jesus' life into what was happening in the Roman empire at the time. Luke tried to record what happened in chronological order. The other gospel writers tend to group things by topic. But Luke has tried to set them out in the order they happened.

So it's an orderly account. It's also the longest gospel.

What were some of Luke's main concerns?

Prophecy is fulfilled

Luke includes details about Jesus' birth that we do not find in any other gospel. Mark's gospel and John's gospel don't mention Jesus' birth at all. Matthew gives Joseph's perspective. But Luke rewinds to well before Mary was pregnant, and gives her perspective.

Luke begins Jesus' story with an elderly priest and his wife. Why? Because Luke wants to show us that, right from the outset, prophecy was being fulfilled. God was keeping his word. Jesus' birth was something the Old Testament had foretold. None of this was random. It was all part of God's great plan of salvation.

The Messiah was coming! The King was coming! The chosen one, the one God promised to send was coming. And the messenger God had promised would come first: John the Baptist, the son of that elderly couple. Everything was ready. The time was right.

God is at work through his Spirit

Luke repeatedly mentions the work of the Holy Spirit. So we see the Spirit descending on Jesus in the form of a dove. It was the Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness, where he was tempted.

As well, Luke recounts all sorts of supernatural events — things that cannot be accounted for by the ordinary laws of nature: miracles. Angels appear on three different occasions in the first one and a half chapters.

Outsiders are welcome

Luke frequently mentions people who were social outcasts (or of lower social status): ritually unclean people like people with leprosy or a woman with bleeding; tax collectors and sinners. Luke is the only gospel writer to record the parable of the *good Samaritan*. (Samaritans were despised by the Jews and not thought of as good.)

Luke wants us to understand that Jesus cared for *all* people. *Everyone* is welcome in God's kingdom.

We might also notice that *'insiders' are welcome*.

When I say the word 'Pharisee', what springs to mind? Jesus criticising them? The fact that they had added lots of rules to God's law — and in doing so, lost sight of God's heart of love and compassion?

One of the things I have been struck by as I worked through Luke is how much time Jesus spent with Pharisees. He ate with sinners and tax collectors. But he ate with Pharisees, too. He taught the crowds — and he tried to teach people like Simon the Pharisee. You might not see this so much in Part 1 of Luke, but as you work through the other parts, take notice of how often Jesus tried to reason with the Pharisees.

Jesus truly came to seek and save the lost. That included people who knew they were lost, like the sinners and tax collectors. It also included people who were blind to the fact that they were lost, like Pharisees.

What does it mean to listen to Jesus?

Have you ever seen a mum say to her children, "Look at me. Now, *listen!*" Maybe you've been that mum who tries to eyeball her children to get them to pay attention to what you have to say. (Perhaps you think of Kath and Kim: 'Look at me, Kimmy...'). Eyeball to eyeball; paying attention. Listening.

Luke wants us to give our attention to Jesus ... and listen to him.

The writers of the Bible used certain writing techniques to get their message across. How do we emphasise things in our writing today? We might use bold, or underline, or italics. But the biblical writers couldn't use italics on their laptops. They needed to use other tactics to make their point clearly. They often used contrast: not this, but that. And they frequently

used repetition. They would repeat a word or an idea to drive their message home. Writers today still use these same writing tactics.

Once we get past Jesus' birth and early life, in chapter 4 we get to Jesus' announcement in Nazareth of his mission as Messiah: to preach the good news, set captives free, heal ... From this point onwards, the idea of listening to Jesus is there. At first, it's fairly quietly in the background. The people of Jesus' home town won't listen to him or accept him as Messiah. The idea of listening is repeated in various parables Jesus told. Over and over again, the idea of listening to Jesus and his message is repeated, especially in these first nine or so chapters that you'll be studying. So it's worth paying attention to this idea.

Who listens? Who refuses to listen?

When people hear the gospel message, why does it go in one ear and out the other for some people — while other people accept it and live it?

In the home of Mary and Martha (when Martha's running around like a headless chook), where is Mary? Sitting at Jesus' feet, *listening*.

(Incidentally, isn't the Bible realistic! God understands that people respond in a range of ways to the gospel message. He knows some people *appear* to be Christians, then wander off. God knows we get caught up in trying to be good hostesses, trying to do the right thing — and sometimes we lose sight of Jesus in the process. These stories of real people and these parables are realistic. The Bible does not sugar-coat reality.) But back to listening ...

What does true listening mean? When you come to that part in the study, take note.

This study climaxes when Jesus, Peter, James and John go up on a mountaintop and Jesus is transformed — some of his heavenly glory is revealed. Who is it at that time who says, 'This is my Son, whom I love; *listen to him!*'?

This study, Luke Part 1, is subtitled 'Listen to him' for a reason. But who are we to listen to? Luke, yes. Jesus, yes, absolutely!

How do we know if, for example, a child has really listened to what we said to them? They do what we say. We don't want to be like children who say, 'Yes, yes, I was listening' — but nothing changes.

In the Bible, listening isn't something passive — something that goes into our ears and sits there. True listening changes us. It changes who we are and what we do and think. It impacts our hearts and our actions.

My prayer is that, as you study Luke Part 1, you'll see Jesus with fresh eyes, hear him with fresh ears — truly *listen to him* with soft, teachable hearts. When we see Jesus more clearly ... when we listen like this, we are changed.

Prayer: Lord, help us to truly listen to Jesus. Lord, please make us more like him.