

Themes in Luke

In this survey of the 24 chapters of the Gospel of Luke, I begin with the important topic of the historicity and reliability of the Gospels. The Gospels record things that really happened, and Luke, of the four Gospels, is the one most accessible to those who have historical interest. Luke 1:1-2 reads, “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us. They were handed down to us by those who, from the first, were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.” Do you notice the references to history? Luke says, “There have been several accounts. There are eyewitnesses and these eyewitnesses have handed things down to us.” ‘Handed down’ is a technical term. It means delivered over, settled, given in a careful way. In my family, on each one of our children’s birthdays, the birthday-boy or girl is told the story of the day of their birth. Every year we tell the story—when mommy went into labor, what we ate for supper, what problems arose, whether it was cold, warm, or rainy, whether they were cone heads. The story changes very little. We hand it down. That is what Luke is saying. This account is guarded, handed down very carefully from generation to generation.

Furthermore, the account is handed down by eyewitnesses who are servants of the Word, so they care about getting it right. “Therefore,” Luke is saying, “I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning.” You will notice there are some things in the Gospel of Luke that make you wonder how the evangelist would know them. For instance, Luke 2:19 says, “Mary treasured these things up in her heart.” We have good reason to believe that Luke interviewed Mary and asked her to tell the story of Jesus’ birth. Luke 1:3 continues, “It seemed good for me, also, to write an orderly account for you.” An ‘orderly account’ does not necessarily mean a chronological account, but rather there is a theological order, or a topical order. This is done, Luke says, “So that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4).

Luke 2:1 mentions a decree issued by Caesar Augustus. When did this happen? Luke tells us it was when Quirinius was governor of Syria. The ministry of John the Baptist started, according to Luke 3:1, during the reign of Tiberias Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and when Herod was tetrarch of Galilee and his brother, Phillip, was tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis. Luke continually makes it as clear as he can that we are talking about real history.

Since Luke makes a stronger historical claim and writes in a more sophisticated kind of Greek than the other Gospel writers, he has also been attacked the hardest by critics of the Bible. Most notably, in the nineteenth century, Luke was attacked by a man named F.C. Baur, a great linguist who developed some tools that people make excellent use of today on the Greek language. Like a lot of critics, however, Baur got some of his ideas from the philosophy of his day, and he was influenced by a man named Hegel. The Hegelian idea is that history proceeds through a process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Baur tried to read the Bible through this lens. He argued that in the New Testament, the thesis is Peter (representing Christianity as a Jewish movement), the antithesis is Paul (representing a free Gospel with no need for regulations from the law), and the resolution is to be found in the Book of Acts (as in the council of Acts 15 where everybody agrees). According to Baur, this process would take over one hundred years, which places the writing of Acts in the years A.D. 150-200 A.D. This would put the Gospel of Luke, according to its accounts and themes, also around A.D. 150-190.

There was a man who lived about thirty years after Baur named Sir William Ramsey who was a professor of archeology. He believed Baur’s model was correct and sought to prove it correct. He said the way you can tell if Luke and Acts are reliable is to go to those things that can be verified or falsified and find out if they are true. If they are not—as he expected—then we know the whole thing is false. If

Luke is false, he concluded, then the whole Gospel is unreliable.

Ramsey especially checked the names of people and places. For example, when the book of Acts says Paul had to face a judge named Gallio, does this Gallio exist in other historical records? Yes, there are records of Gallio in the right city, at the right time. The book of Acts mentions people who are called *ethnarches* and *politarches* and chief men. If those titles are not historically correct, you know Acts is a fabrication. Imagine in the year 2050 someone from Austria comes to America to write a history of the state of Nebraska. If there were no libraries, no books, and no records of any kind, what do you think the odds are that he would understand the difference between mayors and city counselors, or between city townships and county municipalities, or between state and federal judges? There is virtually no chance he would get all those distinctions right. But Ramsey found that Luke was right every time.

Here is a classic illustration. The rulers of Thessalonica are called *politarches*. That term sounds suspicious to people who know Greek because *politarch* has two words in it: *polis* (city) and *arch* (ruler). One might think Luke did not know the name of their rulers so he just called them “city-rulers.” What makes it even worse is that no one had found a *politarch* anywhere in any Roman city, that is, until Ramsey started digging around the ruins of Thessalonica. He found an inscription about a man who was a *politarch*. He found nineteen inscriptions to different *politarches*. He found them in Thessalonica and only Thessalonica and only from around the years A.D. 40-70, precisely when the traveling in Acts was taking place.

That type of scenario happened many times to Ramsey. As a result, Ramsey became a Christian, and he was criticized for becoming too credulous. But in the end the Bible stands. In the opening of his Gospel Luke says, in essence, that he is laying it on the line, he intends to be an historian. One person named Stephen Neil summarized Ramsey’s work this way, “Every person is found just where he ought to be.”

Can we expect Luke or Mary to remember years after the events and to get it right? Is it too much to expect Mary to remember what the shepherds said? Let me tell you a story. When I was nineteen I was arrested for murder. I was taken into custody for the murder of a policeman and for just escaping from jail. My brother and I were walking along the road and, of course, when you are taken into police custody for murder, the first thing you want to do is show some identification. My brother and I were college students at the time, and he had put his wallet through the wash several times, so everything he had was washed out. Unfortunately, I had to tell them I did not have any identification. I said, “It is near that tree about a mile from here,” and that was where it was. You can imagine them saying, “Likely story, murderer.” Furthermore, my hair was very long at the time. I had more hair in three strands than the policeman who arrested us did all over. He was about 6’7,” 320 pounds with large jowls. We were hippies and he did not like us at all. My brother had a great time telling the story about the time I was almost hauled off to jail. Within twenty minutes I proved I was not the murderer they were looking for. Although terrifying at the time, my brother and I had a great time telling the story in the subsequent years.

Fifteen years later I heard a story about police insensitivity and I remembered that incident. I told Paul, my brother, to write down the story from memory and I would write it down too so we could see how they compared. I wrote it from the standpoint of injustice because I was treated badly at age nineteen. His story was just about being brothers. Our stories were wildly different because they had totally different purposes, but they were very similar when it came to the police scene. We used identical words like, “Let us see some identification. Spread out your arms and legs on the car.” We had not talked about the story for fifteen years but it was one of those things you cannot forget. When Luke claims to be a

historian, we can trust him because certain things cannot be forgotten.

Luke also tells us that his purpose is to lead Christians toward maturity. He tells his reader Theophilus that he is writing so that he might know the certainty of the things he has been taught (Luke 1:3). Certainty is the goal, getting everything straight from the beginning, as well as looking to prophetic confirmation. He begins naturally enough with the birth of Jesus. You should notice that Luke is loaded with references and allusions to the Old Testament. Jesus comes to fulfill prophecy. He comes to answer the hope. Luke does not use quotations of the Old Testament, but rather He is eager to communicate statements about the hopes of redemption.

Since Luke addresses Theophilus, who must be Greek, Luke is often considered to be the Gospel for people who are Greek or Gentiles. It is interesting to me that in a book that is supposed to be written for Gentiles, Luke starts off with Old Testament background. That is because Luke wants to make a certain point about the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. There are several options for this relationship. Option one is that Christianity is a subset of Judaism. If you want to be a Christian, you have to be a Jew first. That was the view of some. The second view shows that the church rejected the first view—you do not have to follow the law of the Jews (see Acts 15). Another view is that Christianity and Judaism are simply totally different things. You are either Christian or Jewish and if you are a Christian, you do not need the Old Testament. That view was judged heretical over the years. Another option would be to say that Christianity and Judaism overlap. There are Christians, and Jews, and some Christians who are also Jews.

Judaism narrows down to one person—Jesus Christ, the one true faithful Jew. He is the one who learns the lesson that the Jews should have learned, then that message goes out to the world. In order to understand the Christian faith, one must see that there is no line that separates the two. That is the perspective that Luke wants to give us on the Christian faith. That is why Luke, writing for Gentiles, starts off with the Old Testament. Christianity is born out of Judaism; it brings it to completion. There is an organic connection between the two and Luke wants people to understand that you cannot read the New Testament without understanding the Old Testament. He says that once you are in the Christian church, you need to look back to the Old Testament because these are your new roots. Christians are the new Israelites, fulfilling the faith of Israel. We are adopted children, born into another family, so we have to know the roots of that family.

Luke is concerned about a salvation that is concrete. We see this in the language of Mary's song in Luke 1:51-53. After Mary hears that Jesus will be born to her, she says about God, "He has performed mighty deeds. He has scattered those who are proud. He brought down rulers from their thrones." Do you see how political and concrete this is? Mary also says, "He has lifted up the humble, filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich away, empty." This is not just talking about saving the soul; it is concrete deliverance. In Luke 1:68-75 Zechariah uses similar language when the birth of John is prophesied:

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days."

Serving without fear, fear of being accosted for not worshipping the gods of other nations, not being killed for refusing to bow down in front of images of Caesar. This is a very political and concrete hope, not just spiritual hope.

Luke 3 and 4 describe preparations for Jesus' ministry, beginning with John the Baptist's call to repentance. John seeks to prepare people to be right with God so that they can see what He is going to do next. Then Luke provides a genealogy that goes back to Adam. Why would the genealogy go back that far? Because Adam is the father of all people.

Luke also stresses the role of the Spirit. Luke 1:35 says, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you [Mary]; the power of the most high will overshadow you." At Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him like a dove to empower Him for ministry. In Luke 4:1, Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit; He returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert. The Spirit led Him to His temptation and presumably kept Him from sin. Luke 4:14 says that Jesus began His ministry with the power of the Spirit. He returned to Galilee with the power of the Spirit and it is understood that this is what enabled Him to perform these miracles. His first preaching mission, in Luke 4:18, began with the words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." Luke is the Gospel of the Spirit, especially in these early chapters. He also says that the church is born by the Spirit. The Christian life, the life of Christ, is spiritual. The Spirit also tells us what to say, and the Spirit will be given to those who ask. Everything is by the Spirit. That is one of Luke's emphases.

In Luke 4 we read Jesus' first sermon, which is not found in any detail in the other Gospels. It says Jesus returned to Galilee in the Spirit and taught at their synagogues. Everyone praised Him. He went back to His hometown, Nazareth, and on the Sabbath went to the synagogue as was His custom, and stood up to read. It was the custom of synagogues to give a visiting speaker the right to speak. The visitor would go to the synagogue, they would choose an Old Testament book, hand it to him, and he would have to pick something from the book and speak on it. He would need to have 39 sermons prepared in advance!

At the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus was given the book of Isaiah. He opened it to the place in Isaiah that says, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." If you compare the text in Isaiah to what Jesus read, you notice that He did not read the end of Isaiah 61:2, which says, "And the day of vengeance of our God." He stood up and said this was the year of God's favor but not yet the day of wrath. This is the day of the Savior. The people heard Him read and then sit down. They were interested, keeping their eyes on Him, and He began to speak from where He sat. Jesus said, "This Scripture is fulfilled today." That was a strong statement. The people were divided. Jesus always exposes our attitudes. All spoke well of Him and were amazed by His gracious words. Some also asked, however, if this was Joseph's son, which probably means they were thinking, "Wait a minute. We know Joseph, he is just a craftsman. We know Jesus, He is not noble. We have seen Jesus running around with snot running down His nose when He got cold." I am sure Jesus had a reputation for being a great kid, an amazing person. But some were offended by Jesus' claim to be the agent of God bringing the day, the year of God's favor.

Jesus discerned their attitude and, in Luke 4:23, said, "I know what you are going to say: 'Physician, heal yourself.'" That was a common proverb in antiquity and it had different forms. It implies the question: "How are you qualified to say all these things?" Jesus knew they would ask Him to legitimate Himself with miracles, but said, "You are expecting miracles and I am not going to give you these miracles."

What is it exactly that Jesus said that bothered them? First He said, “The Spirit has anointed me for one task: to preach good news to the poor.” That is the overarching statement in His first sermon, and could be viewed as the theme of Jesus’ entire ministry, as Luke presents it. Second, “He has sent me to proclaim release of sins and sight for the blind.” This is spiritual restoration (release of sins), and physical restoration (sight for the blind). Third, Jesus said, “I have also been sent to let the oppressed go free.” This reflects Luke’s concern for social issues. Last, He said, “To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.” Preaching good news to the poor is the umbrella to all Jesus does, for it also means the spiritually poor. Jesus’ ministry is predominately a ministry to the poor. Jesus’ miracles heal people. If you were a leper, what was your social and economic status? You were an outcast; you were poor. If you were blind or lame, you would not have been rich. So when Jesus heals people who are deaf, dumb, and blind, that is a ministry to the physically poor. And the preaching of the Gospel is a ministry to the spiritually poor.

Consider further this phrase, “To proclaim release of sins.” It could be translated literally, “To proclaim the release to the oppressed.” That word “release” is the most common word in the New Testament in the Greek language for forgiveness of sins. What Luke is saying is that Jesus’ ministry of release is release of sins and oppression. There is an overlap between sin and oppression in Luke’s Gospel. For example, in Luke 4:33-39, Jesus gives relief to someone who is held by an evil spirit. A demon possession is considered to be something that people need to be relieved from. A release from sin is also a relief from physical oppression. So when Jesus makes this claim, the people say He is a good speaker but He is making awfully big claims for a carpenter’s son who has grown up among them.

Jesus forces a resolution to this initial ambivalence. They are skeptical, having heard what He did in Capernaum and wanting Him to prove Himself by a miracle, but He says, “No prophet is accepted in his hometown.” There He is claiming He is a prophet and that they are acting the way people always act towards prophets. He says He is not going to give them any miracles. Think about Elijah and Elisha—how did they do? Elisha healed Naaman from Syria, a sworn enemy. Elijah shut the skies of Israel up for three years, and then he performed a miracle for the woman in Sidon, which is Gentile territory. So Jesus is telling them not to talk that way to Him. Because of the unbelief of Israel, prophets did not bring miracles of blessing to Israel; they brought miracles of judgment.

Next there is an angry reaction in Luke 4:28 and people tried to push Him off the two hundred foot cliff. That reaction shows us that Jesus touched a nerve, does not it? When you get that mad, maybe there is some guilt involved. What can we see about this task of Jesus’ ministry? Jesus comes to do what He says. He is going to preach good news to the poor and that good news has a spiritual dimension, along with political, economic, and social sides. That is clear throughout the Gospel of Luke.

Is there something of the town of Nazareth in us? Do we simply want Jesus to produce His goods for us? Do we desire to control Jesus’ ministry for ourselves? “You do for me, and I will be pleased, and then I will serve You.” We have to be careful to not regard the Gospel as our possession to be held for our good. There are people in this world who get upset with their pastors for ministering outside their church or talking to visitors after church. So before we quickly condemn the people of Nazareth, let us consider if we may not have a touch of that in ourselves.