

Themes in Luke (cont.)

Chapters 9-19 of the Gospel of Luke is almost entirely material that is unique to Luke. There is very little in these chapters that are found in Matthew, Mark, or John. This makes it easier to see what is distinctive about the spirituality, the theology, of each of the Gospels. The spirituality of all four Gospels is fundamentally the same: the belief in the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; faith and devotion to Him; an emphasis on repentance, faith, and life in community; following Jesus' words and deeds. These are the universal themes of all four Gospels. Yet there are certain emphases in each Gospel.

Matthew stresses that the Christian live out his or her life in the presence of Jesus. At the beginning of his account we hear Jesus called "Emmanuel" and at the end we hear Jesus say, "I will be with you always." In between, while discussing community life, Jesus that if someone is undergoing church discipline, and two or three gather in His name to set things right, He will be in their midst. So the Christian life—individually and corporately—is lived out in Jesus' presence. That is one of Matthew's themes. Another theme is a choice of obedience. On many occasions, Matthew lets us choose between the two ways: serving God or serving man. Will you take the broad or the narrow path? Will you bear good or bad fruit? Will you serve the Lord truly or falsely? Will good or evil come out of your mouth?

Mark's picture of the disciple's spiritual life is much more strenuous. Stephen Barton makes this point in his book, *The Spirituality of the Gospels*. It is an austere picture; there is very little ethical teaching in Mark. The main stress in Mark is the way of the cross; the entire book rushes toward the cross. Mark's main teaching regarding discipleship is that if you want to follow Jesus, you have to take up your cross, deny yourself, and follow Him. While that teaching is present in the other Gospels too, those statements of self-denial are somewhat stronger in Mark. Jesus is powerful; He is present, but so is the opposition. All through Mark we know that Jesus is rushing to the cross, and so are we.

The Gospel of Luke, by contrast, uses a number of words to set up themes that are not found in the other Gospels. Above all, the Gospel of Luke is a Gospel of joy. In chapters 1 and 2, there is joy at Jesus' birth. The angels and the people rejoice. There is joy, even in persecution, because the prophets suffered too. There is joy as the 70 disciples return from their mission of kingdom proclamation. There is joy that their names are written in the kingdom of heaven. There is joy that God revealed His secrets to His disciples. There is joy over Jesus' wonderful words and deeds. There is joy in heaven over the repentance of one sinner. There is joy in Zacchaeus as Jesus comes to His house. There is joy when the disciples meet the risen Christ. Luke even uses other words and phrases to describe feelings of joy like, "hearts burning within," "filled with happy fire," "made strong." The source of joy is not simply a sunny day. The source of joy is repentance, conversion, and faith. "Repent," as it says in Acts 3, "that seasons of refreshing may come upon you." That is the source of joy—when God forgives and blesses. Thus a distinctive feature of Luke is his focus on joy.

Luke also has a distinctive approach to the final week of Jesus' life. There are some things that Luke brings to a culmination in the final week. The different Gospels are paced differently. Which of the Gospels goes fast? Mark uses the word "immediately" again and again. The Gospel of Matthew has an even pace, alternating between accounts of miracles and long blocks of teaching. Luke is the leisurely Gospel, using a lot of phrases that makes us feel like things are slowing down and we have time to pause. Luke says "it came to pass" about 50 times, as though the event took awhile but finally came to pass. He also uses the phrase "in those days" frequently. Ten different times Luke says, "They headed for Jerusalem." It takes them 10 chapters just to walk down to Jerusalem. Luke is not in a hurry. He is talking about discipleship and letting us listen to Jesus' teaching, and he takes his time. The pace is a

little more relaxed.

Luke slows the pace because the ministry of Christ is the center piece of time. All time can be viewed as leading up to it and then proceeding from it. Everything that happened prior to Jesus' birth was leading up to His birth. And everything since then is governed by His birth, death, and resurrection. The way you see that in Luke is through the key word "today" which appears 20 times in Luke and Acts. It is used eight times in Matthew, once in Mark, never in John, and about a dozen in Luke. Many of the examples are connected to well-known events. In Luke 2:11, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." During Jesus first sermon at Nazareth He says, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." In Luke 13:33, Herod is going to kill Jesus but Jesus tells him, "I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal. In any case, I must keep going today." To Zacchaeus Jesus says, "I must stay at your house today." After He does He says, "Today, salvation has come to this house." And with the final "today" of the Gospel Jesus says to the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise." These are all events that are central moments in the lives of those involved. It reflects Luke's sense of divine timing: everything leads to Christ's ministry, everything proceeds from it.

Luke's use of "today" reflects his conviction that time and history are under God's control. It is also conveyed by another Lukan word, "It is necessary" which is *dei* in Greek. It is used 19 times in Luke and only a few times in the rest of the Gospels. Luke uses other words to say that the things that are happening are not accidental; they had to happen. God's plan will not be stopped. For example, in Luke 2:34, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel." In other words, the humble will be rising; the proud will be falling. When Jesus was in Jerusalem, at the age of 12, He said to His parents, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know I had to be in my Father's house?" Jesus says it was necessary for Him to be in His Father's house, about His Father's business. It is necessary for Jesus to move from one town where they wanted Him to perform miracles to another town, because He has to preach the Gospel in other cities. He also tells His disciples that when they are called to account for their discipleship, the Holy Spirit will teach them what is necessary for them to say.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all tell us how Jesus came to die. Matthew and Mark give a more horizontal perspective, Luke and John a more vertical one. By horizontal, I mean a this-worldly, human explanation. They show how Jesus faced opposition from the Jews because of their pride, because He reviled their traditions. But Luke and John stress that this is God's plan. It was necessary from the beginning that Jesus had to be crucified. Jesus says in Luke 9:22, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." It is necessary for Jesus to go to Jerusalem because it is not possible for a prophet to die outside of Jerusalem, as Jesus says in Luke 13:33. It is necessary for the Son of Man to suffer and be rejected by this generation. Another instance is in Luke 22:37 when Jesus says, "It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors.' And I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me." It is an absolute necessity that Jesus die and rise. That is stated in chapter 24. It was necessary for the Son of man to be delivered into the hands of sinful men. He also had to rise. As we read in Acts 2:24, "It was impossible for death to keep its hold on him." Jesus had the power of divine life in Him so there should have been no doubt that He would rise. When He explains His resurrection to His two disciples on the road to Emmaus, in Luke 24:25, He says, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" This was God's plan. This is the testimony Luke brings to the entire chorus of the Gospels. He is saying that the whole Bible says this. This is a testimony that the death, suffering, and resurrection had to happen.

How does the whole Bible testify that Jesus had to rise? Jesus is thinking of the Old Testament. Where do we start looking to find out how that is so? The imperfect answer is to start with certain Old Testament prophecies. That is valid, but the problem is that by the time you are done with the Messianic prophets in the Old Testament, you have only covered about one or two percent of the Old Testament and you have another 98 percent to deal with. What Jesus is saying is that the whole Old Testament somehow testifies to the need for a redeemer. This is done through various foreshadowing events like the near sacrifice of Isaac, which is then likened to the actual sacrifice of Jesus, God's beloved Son. The best way to do it is to look at how whole books testify to the need for Christ.

The book of Judges is a sad book about repeated failures in the raising of a judge. As soon as the judge died, the people fell back into sin again. When people read through Judges, they tend to end with Samson and Delilah, because that has a quasi-happy ending. One rarely hears a sermon on Micah and his idols or the concubine who was raped and cut into pieces—people do not talk about these scenes. A statement used frequently in the book is, “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.” Today, people think that means that everyone was acting according to their conscience—things were pretty good. But we might put it this way: everyone did whatever they pleased; whatever they desired—good, bad, or indifferent. The remark that explains the behavior is that there was no king. By implication, the solution is to get a king.

Moving on to Samuel, Samuel says that before you ask for a king, watch out because you may get a king like all the other nations, a king who will tax you, oppress you, and all the rest. But the people say, “We want a king like all the nations.” As a result, they get a king just like the nations: decent in warfare, but grasping the throne no matter what it takes, including his own people. So if you think a king is going to deliver you, look at Saul. But, God has something better in mind, namely David—a deliverer, a redeemer, someone who can help us. Of course David broke every commandment there was to break. Do you think a human deliverer will do it? The books of Judges and 1 and 2 Samuel, cry out for a king. But you reap what you sow and it only gets worse after David throughout the rest of kings.

Kings cannot deliver because the best are still sinners, the bad ones lead you astray, and the best of the best, like Josiah, was unable to get the people to follow him. What about prophets? They spoke the Word, but nobody listened so there was no deliverance. The priests offered hope—sacrifice for sin—again and again and again. Every time they offered another sacrifice, it made it clear that the previous one before was not sufficient. So the great offices of the Old Testament—prophets, priests, and kings—declared to us that we need more. We need someone who will truly redeem us. This is what Jesus says.

Do not be surprised that Jesus died for sins; He is the High Priest. He is the King that defeats the enemies. He is the Prophet because He explains what He does while He is doing it. The message of the entire Old Testament is that you needed a better deliverer. These things had to happen under God's care. Once they happened, the news had to go to all the nations. Luke tells us in 24:45-48, “Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.’” Both Matthew and Luke end with the proclamation being made to all the nations. Luke begins and ends with it. The name will be preached to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

Jesus concludes in Luke 24:49, “I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” They did wait, and they were clothed, and

they did take the Gospel to the nations by the power of the Spirit, the spirit of Christ, who brings to mind all that Jesus said and did.