

# The Gospel of Luke

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# The Gospel of Luke

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**T**he Gospel of Luke has been called the most beautiful book ever written. Perhaps this praise has been given because of the number of Jesus' parables included in the Gospel—twenty-eight in all, and more than in any other Gospel. Perhaps it has been given because the Gospel gives a detailed account of the works, teachings, and life of Jesus that are especially important for understanding the way of salvation. Or perhaps the praise has been given because Luke made plain that salvation through Jesus is offered to all people.

Indeed, there are many beautiful aspects to the Gospel of Luke.

The Gospel's orderly arrangement narrates Jesus' life from a point months before His birth to the point of His ascension into heaven. And yet Luke's Gospel is not an eyewitness account. It is evident, however, that Luke carefully investigated Jesus' life and teachings from witnesses (Luke 1:3). Some of those witnesses may have written their own Gospel accounts, such as Mark or Matthew. Some may have told Luke their own testimony of what they had seen and heard, such as some of the apostles and others whose lives had been influenced by Jesus.

In some ways, unlike the other Gospel writers, Luke paid close

attention to historical details. For example, only Luke recorded the names of some of the Roman officials at the time of Jesus' birth. Partly because of Luke's attention to detail, it is easier for historians to approximately date some of the main events of Jesus' life.

Luke's Gospel portrays Jesus as the divine Redeemer, who "came to seek and to save what was lost" (19:10). Accordingly, Jesus is depicted not so much as the Jewish Messiah as He is the Savior for all the people of the world. Time and again Luke emphasized that salvation is not the sole possession of the Jews. It is open to people of all races and all human conditions. The message of Luke's Gospel is that the salvation provided by Jesus is broad enough to include all people.

One common thread between people of the first century A.D. and people living today is their need for a Savior. Men and women are bruised and battered by life's disappointments and society's injustices. So were the people of the first century. People today must face the awfulness of their own sin, just as people had to do in the first century. And people today can find strength and hope through trusting in Jesus, just as Luke's first reader, Theophilus, may have done when he read the Gospel of Luke.

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## Author

Even though Luke's name does not appear in the third Gospel, there is plenty of evidence that he was the author of this book. The Gospel of Luke is the first of two volumes (the Acts of the Apostles being the second) addressed to Theophilus. In the Book of Acts, the author uses the pronoun "we" to indicate those times when he was a traveling companion of Paul's. Paul referred to Luke's companionship in three of his own letters:

- "Our dear friend Luke, the doctor" (Col. 4:14);
- "Only Luke is with me" (II Tim. 4:11); and
- "Luke, my fellow [worker]" (Philem. 24).

Sources dating back to the second century A.D. give more evidence for Luke's authorship. In a prologue attached to the Gospel, Luke was acknowledged as the author of both the Gospel and the Book of Acts. Around A.D. 170 a list of New Testament Scriptures accepted by the church, called the Muratorian Canon, also credited Luke as the

writer of the Gospel and of Acts.

Unlike the other three Gospels, the Gospel of Luke was written by a Gentile. Possibly born in Antioch of Syria, Luke was a physician. Some Bible historians speculate that Luke may have been a freedman. Greek names with contractions ending in *as* (such as Luke's original Greek name, *Loukas*) were common among slaves. Greek and Roman masters often educated slaves to become doctors and later freed them to practice as physicians. Some historians have even suggested that Luke was born into the household of Theophilus, a government official to whom Luke addressed both his Gospel and the Book of Acts.

Luke wrote more than one-fourth of the New Testament—more than any other person. His Greek grammatical construction is generally recognized as among the best in the New Testament. And so are his storytelling-abilities. The Gospel of Luke is not merely a compilation of fragments; it is an integrated story written by a well-informed person.

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## Purpose

Luke addressed his Gospel to a man named Theophilus. The author called the recipient of his book "most excellent" (Luke 1:3), possibly indicating that Theophilus was an important government official. Perhaps Theophilus, whose name means "lover of God," was already convert to Christianity who yearned to learn more about his

new faith in Jesus Christ. Or perhaps Theophilus wanted to explore the facts about Christ so he could decide for himself what to believe. Either scenario might explain why Luke paid close attention to historical details.

Thus Luke's purpose in writing this Gospel seems to have been to create an accurate, dependable

account of the works, teachings, and life of Jesus.

His own Gentile roots and his Gentile audience explain why his Gospel has a universal perspective. It speaks to the condition of the entire human race, not just to Jews. Luke either omitted Jewish phrases and practices found in the other

Gospels or explained them carefully, making his Gospel helpful and readable for those less familiar with Jewish ways. Perhaps Luke, even though he addressed the book specifically to Theophilus, expected that his Gospel would be read by many others.

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## Date

Luke 1:2 seems to imply that Luke wrote not only during or near the time of the apostles but also that they were the source of some of his information. Yet there remains some disagreement over when Luke wrote his Gospel.

Because many Bible scholars believe Luke used Mark's Gospel as one of the sources for his own writing, they say Luke must have written his Gospel sometime after Mark. Therefore, if Mark was written in the A.D. fifties or early sixties, Luke was probably written between A.D. 59 and 63. These dates seem most likely, considering that Luke closed the Book of Acts—the Gospel's sequel—not with Paul's martyrdom (thought to have taken place about A.D. 67) but with the end of Paul's

first imprisonment in Rome (thought to have taken place between A.D. 60 and 62).

Other Bible scholars believe Luke must have been written much later—in the A.D. seventies, for instance. However, these scholars allow their personal views to color their judgment. If, for example, these scholars believe no one can predict the future, then they assume that Luke's Gospel had to be written after A.D. 70. (The Gospel contains a brief prophecy of the temple's destruction, which actually occurred in A.D. 70.) But by dating the Gospel in this way, they overlook the fact that the Book of Acts fails to record Paul's martyrdom—something Luke almost certainly would have included had it already occurred.

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## How to Use the *Study Book*

The study book is meant to be used with a Bible opened beside it. Before studying one of the lettered sections within a lesson, read the corresponding Bible passage. Then refer back and forth between your Bible and the study book until you

get the meaning of the passage.

Also think about your personal answer to each of your "Ask Yourself" questions. Finally, come to class prepared to discuss the Bible passage and raise any questions that have occurred to you.

# 1

## The Savior Comes into the World

Luke 1—2

### **a** Luke's Purpose (1:1-4)

Since 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.

—Luke 1:3, 4

The first stories about Jesus circulated in oral form. But as more believers were added to the church and as eyewitnesses began to pass from the scene, it became necessary to put Jesus' words and the stories of His deeds into written form.

Several accounts of Jesus—probably including the Gospels of Matthew and Mark—had already been produced by the time Luke decided to write his own. Yet Luke undertook to check all the facts for himself and write an orderly account. Luke was a Gentile doctor (Col. 4:14) from elsewhere, but he certainly could have visited Palestine and talked with some of the people who had known Jesus. For instance, Luke may have learned

### UNRELIABLE ACCOUNTS:

#### False Biographies of JESUS

In the Gospel according to the Hebrews, Jesus is reported as referring to “my Mother, the Holy Spirit.” The Gospel according to the Egyptians teaches celibacy as ideal—even within marriage. The Gospel of Thomas tells of Jesus' performing miracles as a child (see John 2:11). The questionable authenticity of some accounts of Jesus' life shows why Luke found it important to conduct a careful investigation and sort through the claims (Luke 1:3).

many of the details surrounding Jesus' birth from Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Luke's efforts were aimed primarily at a man named Theophilus

[thee-AHF-ih-luss]. His title (“most excellent,” vs. 3) tells us that he may have been a public official. Some students of the Bible think that Theophilus had not yet decided what to believe about Jesus and that Luke wrote this Gospel as an evangelism tool. Others think Theophilus may have been someone with influence in Rome and Luke hoped that by his reading this Gospel, he would be convinced to defend Christianity. Still others believe his name (literally, “lover of God”) tells us he was already a believer in Christ. Perhaps he had recently been converted and needed more information in order to grow spiritually.

Whatever the explanation, we can benefit from the information Luke compiled for Theophilus. We should not be satisfied with a superficial knowledge about Jesus if we want to develop spiritually. That’s why Luke’s goal for Theophilus is also an excellent objective for us: “That you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (vs. 4). We need to be sure about our faith.

*Ask Yourself . . . How sure am I about what I believe? Am I growing closer to Christ and learning more about Him?*

### Luke 1:5-80 in Brief

These verses describe events preceding the birth of Jesus. The angel Gabriel foretold the birth of John the Baptist to John’s father-to-be, Zechariah. Zechariah was tempo-

rarily deprived of the power of speech because he doubted the angel (vss. 5-25). Gabriel similarly foretold the birth of Jesus to Jesus’ mother-to-be, Mary. Unlike Zechariah, Mary believed the angel (vss. 26-38). Mary traveled to Zechariah’s wife—Elizabeth, a relative of Mary’s—and expressed her joyful feelings about God (vss. 39-56). John the Baptist was born and at his circumcision Zechariah’s power of speech was restored (vss. 57-66). Zechariah prophesied about the roles Jesus and John would play when grown (vss. 67-79). John grew up in a wilderness area (vs. 80).

## **b** Jesus Is Born (2:1-7)

**While [Mary and Joseph] were [in Bethlehem], the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.**

—Luke 2:6, 7

Luke introduced Jesus’ birth by setting it in its historical context. He mentioned two officials—the emperor of Rome, Caesar Augustus, and the governor of Syria, Publius Sulpicius Quirinius. He also mentioned a political event: the Roman census that drew Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem.

Luke’s historical approach under-

## When Was Jesus Born?



**M**ost Bible scholars have concluded that Jesus was born sometime between 8 B.C. and 4 B.C. Here are some of the facts that must be considered:

- Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1) was emperor of Rome from 31 B.C. to A.D. 14.
- One Roman inscription refers to an official who governed Syria sometime in the first decade B.C. and again for a while in the first decade A.D.; this may have been Quirinius (vs. 2).
- The earliest Roman census we know about from sources other than the Bible was conducted in A.D. 6. Since these censuses were probably conducted every fourteen years, the 'first census would have been in 8 B.C. However, it may have been delayed a year or more in Palestine.
- Jesus may have lived for as long as two years before Herod the Great died in the spring of 4 B.C. (Matt. 2:16, 19).
- Jesus was about thirty when He began His ministry in A.D. 26 or 27 (Luke 3:1, 23).

scores the fact that at Christ's birth the eternal God invaded temporal human affairs. Not only that, but also God used secular rulers and events to accomplish His purposes.

The Roman census was not so much to count people as to determine who owed taxes and who could serve in the Roman army (though Jews were not subject to military conscription). To comply with the census, Joseph had to travel about seventy miles—at least a three-day journey—from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the town of his ances-

tors. Mary was almost ready to give birth, so it was not the best time for her to take a trip. But there was no way Joseph could delay the trip. So they decided Mary should go with him.

Since Bethlehem was filled to overflowing with travelers, there were no suitable accommodations for a pregnant woman. So, tradition says, Mary gave birth to her first-born son in a cave that had been made into a stable. Some Bible students, on the other hand, think Joseph and Mary stayed in the open



A silver star marks the spot in the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem, where tradition says Jesus was born.

stances might seem, we can find strength knowing that God cared enough to send His Son to experience life as we know it.

*Ask Yourself . . . How do I feel when I think of Jesus' being born in the most unfavorable and unpromising of circumstances? What in my life can I relate to that situation?*

courtyard of a crowded inn, where there would have been a series of stalls along the walls. Travelers used the stalls as stables and lean-to shelters. Quite possibly, Mary gave birth surrounded by the activity of the courtyard. She wrapped her baby tightly with a cloth strip resembling a bandage. Then she laid Him in a trough used for feeding animals.

Being born in a stable was a humble beginning for the One who would be the Savior of the world! Mary must have wondered how the angel's words about Him (1:32, 33) could come true.

We can be thankful, however, that Luke told this side of the story. He showed us how low God stooped to lift fallen humanity. Jesus came as a poor, humble, homeless baby. Because He identified with the lowest, He gives hope today to those who have no other source of hope.

No matter how futile our circum-

## **C** Shepherds Hear the Good News (2:8-20)

The angel said to [the shepherds], "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."

—Luke 2:10, 11

An angel announced the birth of the Messiah to ordinary shepherds, not to powerful rulers or religious leaders. Why did God single them out for such an incredible display of heavenly glory?

Possibly God chose to tell shepherds about the birth of His Son to make a point: It is not the influential or the elite who receive God's salvation but those who call for help and place their trust in God. Salvation is

for all, including the weak and oppressed—even society’s outcasts. In announcing the message of salvation, God wanted the world to know there are no second-class people. He loves us all!

These Bethlehem shepherds may have watched over flocks of sheep reserved for temple sacrifices in Jerusalem. It is intriguing to imagine these shepherds, so familiar with sacrificial lambs, being the first to see the Lamb of God—the sacrifice for the sins of the world!

The angel brought “good news of great joy . . . for all the people” (vs. 10). This was a message of hope for those looking for the Messiah. But it was also good news for those who knew nothing about the Messiah. Jesus was God’s solution to the problem of sin. And this good news still transforms the harsh realities of life into joys of a new life and hope for eternity.

The angel told the shepherds that the Savior “is Christ the Lord” (vs. 11). Military and political leaders during those times were frequently called “saviors.” But the angel made it clear that this Savior was unique—He was the Anointed One, the Messiah.

The shepherds stared in amazement, trembling and trying to grasp the significance of the angel’s announcement.

## KEEPERS of the FLOCKS

Since they lived out in the open and were unable to maintain strict obedience to the law, shepherds generally were considered to be ceremonially unclean. As a result, they were despised by religious legalists and were typically excluded from temple worship.

Custom did not allow shepherds to serve as witnesses in legal cases, possibly because they were considered unscrupulous characters who often took things that belonged to others. How ironic that God invited these despised men to be witnesses to the greatest event of history (see Luke 2:17)!

*This area near Bethlehem is known as “Shepherd’s Field.”*



Suddenly the night sky exploded with the sounds of angels praising God. They gave glory to God and announced peace for all who receive God's favor.

People long for peace, but true peace cannot be achieved until individuals experience inner peace, which is possible only through obedient faith in Jesus Christ.

Overwhelmed by the angel's announcement, the shepherds dropped everything and hurried to see what they had heard about. They found the baby just as they had been told. Afterward, they could not contain their enthusiasm. They stopped passersby and told people loitering nearby about the events that had brought them to find the Christ.

*Ask Yourself . . . When was the last time I was so excited about something God was doing in my life that I just had to tell somebody?*

When we come face-to-face with things God has done, we too will have to tell others. Unfortunately, the familiarity of the story of Jesus' birth sometimes dilutes the astonishment of it all. Unless we are careful, we can lose the wonder: *Yes, it is great. But I've heard it all before.*

The shepherds returned to their fields, but they were changed. How could they help but praise and glorify God for what they had seen?

Meanwhile, Mary did not completely comprehend the events that were happening around her. She



**The  
MESSIAH  
The  
CHRIST  
The  
'ANOINTED ONE'**

*Christ* is a word borrowed from Greek. It means "Anointed One," signifying divine commissioning for a specific task. In Old Testament times, kings and priests were anointed with oil as a sign of their divine appointment.

The Hebrew word for the Anointed One is translated *Messiah*. It was used of the promised one who would deliver Israel from oppression. Most Jews thought He would be a political leader. They did not consider that His mission might be to free them from sin.

"treasured . . . and pondered" them in her heart (vs. 19). She would never forget what happened the night Jesus was born.

Like Mary, we do not have to understand everything God is doing before we can appreciate His work in our lives. We can ponder God's ways and at the same time treasure what He is doing.

*Ask Yourself . . . What is God doing in my life that I don't fully understand? What might I gain by slowing down enough to ponder it?*

## **d** Jesus Is Taken to the Temple (2:21-40)

**When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. —Luke 2:22**

Joseph and Mary carefully followed the law. They had Jesus circumcised when He was eight days old (vs. 21; see Lev. 12:3). Jesus, who would usher in the new covenant, fulfilled all the requirements of the old covenant.

It was customary for Jewish boys to be named when they were circumcised. Mary and Joseph used the name the angel had given (Luke 1:31). “Jesus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Joshua*; it means “the Lord saves.”

The law also required purification for Mary and her baby (2:22). All Jewish mothers were ceremonially unclean for seven days following the birth of a son. Then they had to wait an additional thirty-three days before they could offer a temple sacrifice for purification (see Lev. 12:1-3).

Again we see Jesus’ link with the poor.

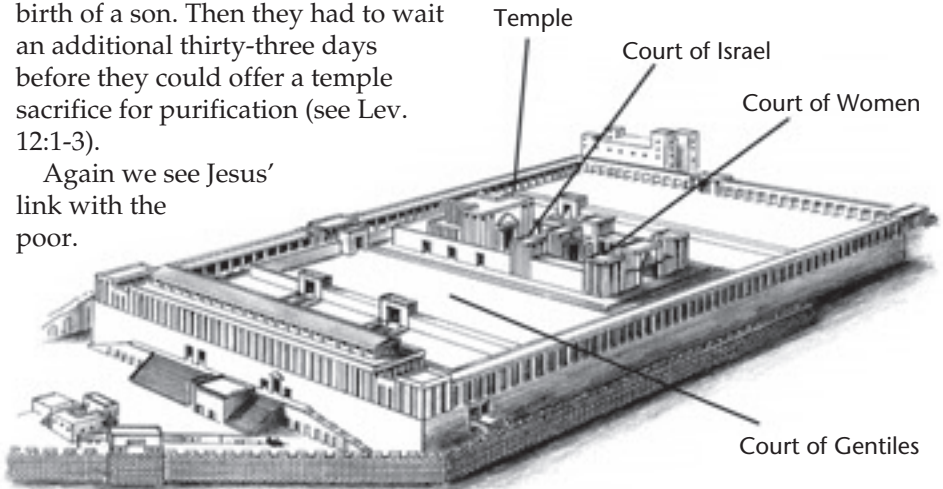
His parents brought an offering people gave when they couldn’t afford the traditional lamb (Luke 2:24; see Lev. 12:6-8).

Then they consecrated Jesus as their firstborn son (Luke 2:23; see Exod. 13:2, 12). This ceremony reminded Jews that each child was a gift from God. But in this special case Jesus was a gift from God to the whole world.

At the temple Mary and Joseph met two devout elderly people: Simeon (Luke 2:25-35) and Anna (vss. 36-38).

The Holy Spirit prompted Simeon to go to the temple at the same time Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were there. Luke said Simeon had been waiting “for the consolation of Israel” (2:25)—an expression rabbis of that time used to speak of their hope for the coming Messiah.

The Holy Spirit had told Simeon that he would live to see the Messiah. When Simeon saw Jesus, he knew his prayers had been



answered. He held the baby and blessed Him, saying He would be God's salvation.

Simeon's view of the Messiah had more dimensions than what others hoped for. Most thought of the Messiah as a political leader who would set the Jewish nation free. Simeon grasped the Messiah's spiritual nature. Those who rejected Him would fall in judgment; those who accepted Him would be exalted (vs. 34). Either way, no one would be able to remain neutral about Him.

It's still the same today. We must have an opinion about Jesus. Either we are for Him or we are against Him. Either we surrender our lives to Him or we are at war with Him.

*Ask Yourself . . . Have I ever tried to remain neutral about Jesus? What would I do differently if I could do it over again?*

Mary, Joseph, and Jesus also met a prophetess named Anna in the temple. She was either eighty-four years old or she had been a widow for eighty-four years—the text is not clear (2:37). She may have lodged in one of the rooms of the temple complex, or at least she spent most of her waking hours at the temple. She was truly pious, and no doubt like Simeon, she had longed to see the Messiah. When she finally did see Jesus, she praised God and told other devout people about Him.

The stories of Simeon and Anna provide a valuable reminder that God rewards the faithful. He pre-

served the lives of that man and woman until they saw the Lord. Similarly, God's plan includes showing us kindnesses along the way of our lives.

After Mary and Joseph had Jesus circumcised and presented Him at the temple, they returned to their home in Nazareth of Galilee (vs. 39). Although Luke did not say so, this move did not occur until after the family had lived for a while in Egypt (Matt. 2:13-23). In Nazareth Jesus grew and was filled with God's wisdom (Luke 2:40).

### Luke 2:41-52 in Brief

The temple figures in the only other biblical story we have from Jesus' early years. Mary and Joseph had taken Jesus with them to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover, one of the three most important festivals in the Jewish calendar. When the Feast was over, the caravan headed for Nazareth without Jesus. (Possibly Joseph—at the back of the caravan—thought Jesus was with Mary, while she—at the front—thought Jesus was with Joseph.) After discovering Jesus was not in the caravan, Joseph and Mary tracked Jesus down at the temple, which He said was the natural place for Him to be.

Jesus, an obedient son, returned with Mary and Joseph to Nazareth, where He finished growing up.