

## **A Brief Introduction to the Gospel of Luke**

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### **Introducing – Luke**

Over the next couple of months we will be focusing on the Gospel of Luke. Please read it. All of it. It's a great story, arguable the greatest ever!

It's not easy to read it fresh if you've already read it several times. This time try different ways to read it and re-read it:

- Read the whole book quickly, over a couple of days, to get the big picture and plot
- Read it more slowly, imagining yourself in the situations, meeting the people
- Write down anything you don't understand (we tend to just skip these bits), and questions you have
- Try a different translation. I have copied chapters 4-8 from The Message version which really brings it alive.
- If your Bible has notes about this, compare Luke's version of events to Mark and Matthew's. How does Luke subtly alter the story? Which stories are only in Luke?
- Write down any words that jump out at you: repeated words, dramatic or emotional words, puzzling words ... look out for them, let them work in your soul
- Sit in prayer with just one verse that jumps out at you.
- If you have children around, read them a story, or re-tell it in your own words.

### **Who was Luke?**

To answer this question we have to first ask "how do we know anything about who and when and why the New Testament was written?". For answers to this we have some very old documents, copied from even older documents. As well as the scriptures there are historical writings, some going back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century by a man called Irenaeus. He said that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Gospel was written by Luke, who was a doctor from Antioch in Syria (these days Turkey), who travelled with Paul and recorded Paul's teaching.

There is also evidence within the Bible. Luke is referred to in Paul's letters. Look up Colossians 4:14, Phil 24:2 and 2 Tim 4:11. (He may also be the 'brother' in 2 Cor 8:18.) It is especially interesting that Paul tells us that Luke was not a Jew, which makes him the only non-Jewish writer in the Bible. He writes in a Greek style which shows that he was well educated.

The most fascinating thing of all is surely that Luke includes himself by writing the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of Acts in the 'first person', describing the action from the perspective of "we". The shift from talking about "they" to "we" happens at Acts 16:10, in a place called Troas, which might indicate that Luke joined Paul, Silas and Timothy there. However, given that Paul & co. had just spent some time in Antioch (ch 15) it might be more logical that Luke left his home and joined the team there. What an adventure he embarked on!

And later, what became of Luke? He travelled all the way to Rome with Paul, probably completing his own writing there. The early historians tell us that he lived on into his 70s, unmarried, continuing to travel and proclaim the gospel through Europe. He was possibly the most traveled man of the first century!

## **WHY did Luke write his Gospel?**

Luke tells us *why*, right at the beginning, which is “so that you will know the full truth about everything”. The “you” here is a man called Theophilus, who probably was an actual person, but as the name simply means “friend of God” it also refers to anyone, including us today.

‘Luke wrote his Gospel to help him and other believers to a better understanding of the Christian faith, and the best way to achieve this was to set out as much as could be known of the life and teaching of Jesus himself. He had a historical interest in discovering the facts about Jesus.’ (Drane)

‘Luke had the burning inner purpose of bringing men to the faith... the repeated and dramatic demonstration that Christianity was both politically innocent and religiously the true fulfillment of the expectations of Judaism.’ (Martin)

‘Luke is writing both for the church and for the world, and above all for the Church *in* the world; for enquirers outside the church but also inside the Church who want to know how it all began.’ Luke’s Gospel is ‘history with a message’.

The ‘why’ of the Gospel is also answered in Luke’s ‘part two’, which is the Acts of the Apostles. For him it was a seamless story, from the prophecies before Jesus, through Jesus’ life, teaching, dying and rising, through into the birth of the church in the present reality of the Holy Spirit. Together it makes up the “full truth about everything”; the continuing saga of God with us!

## **How did Luke know about Jesus?**

Luke himself never met Jesus. He was not an eye witness to any of the events described in his Gospel. He grew up far away to the north, in a town called Antioch in Syria (now Turkey). Luke wasn’t even a Jew and had never been to Israel until he travelled there with Paul. So how can we be confident that his book is ‘true’?

Luke first heard about Jesus when Paul and his team arrived in Antioch. Luke was utterly inspired by their words, and he received the Holy Spirit for himself, and so decided to leave his job and family and go with them. All those years of study were far from wasted, however. Luke kept studying, but now his subject was Jesus. He kept a journal, recording the events of the journeys, and the stories he was told. My guess was that it was during his visit to Jerusalem that he gathered the most material. Although they didn’t have long there (Acts 21), Luke met James, the other elders, and I believe also Jesus’ mother & the Marys. Although this would have been about 25 years after the events of Easter several of the apostles and other eye witnesses of those extraordinary years were still alive. The way I imagine it, Luke worked flat out while he was there, interviewing them, writing it all down.

He had help. Luke wasn’t the only person doing this. By the time Luke wrote his own book he had read Mark’s Gospel. And Luke used many of Mark’s stories, changing them a bit, tightening up the narrative to make his own points. Matthew was also writing a Gospel (and he also used bits from Mark), but he and Luke never saw each other’s work until after both were completed. John wrote his Gospel mostly independently of the others.

## **A Gospel of Pure Grace** by Franciscan priest Richard Rohr

Luke's Gospel is the most broad-minded and the most forgiving of all four Gospels. Every chance he gets, Luke has Jesus forgiving people, right up to the thief on the cross and the prayer for his persecutors. Luke is quite ready to see God as generous, gratuitous, and merciful. Mercy and inclusivity—Jesus' ministry to outcasts, to gentiles, to the poor—are emphasized a great deal in Luke. In this approach, Luke's sacred text is also called the gospel of women. Far more than any other evangelist, Luke brings women into Jesus' life and shows Jesus' unique way of relating to women. He wants to make Jesus available to the forgotten and diminished, and women usually were.

Luke's Gospel has also been called the Gospel of absolute renunciation. For Luke, to be a disciple one has to let go of everything—not just money or other external idols, but inner idols and ego concerns as well. Luke advocates radically new social patterns of relationship. His is an upside-down gospel: “The first will be last and the last will be first” ([Luke 13:30](#)). Luke uses every story he can to show that what impresses people does not impress God, that people who think they are at the top are often, in God's eyes, at the bottom; and that people who think they are at the bottom are, in God's eyes, often at the top.