

## Luke themes

### Prologue

We come now to the third in this series of talks on the books of the New Testament. If you have heard the previous two, you will know that most of those books can be usefully divided into three main theological streams: the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, the Pauline letters, and the Gospel and letters of John; the remaining six make distinctive contributions but are not so closely unified. In our study of the first stream, we began with Mark's Gospel, which was probably the first to be written and lays the foundation for the other Synoptics and Acts. Then we looked at Matthew's Gospel, which uses Mark as a source and resembles it more closely than Luke does. If you have *not* heard the first two talks, you may like to listen to them first.

We now turn to the third of the Synoptic Gospels: the Gospel of Luke. This also uses Mark as a source, though unlike Matthew it employs only about half of Mark's verses, and like Matthew it adapts many of them. It also shares a lot of material with Matthew that is not in Mark: more than 230 verses. And it includes a lot more content that is unique to itself – that is not in the other Gospels – than Mark or Matthew do. To take only the most obvious example, several of the most famous parables – such as the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son and the rich man and Lazarus – appear only in Luke. It is for these reasons that we are dealing with it last of the three; it was not necessarily the last of them to be written.

There is still plenty of common ground between Luke and the other Synoptic Gospels. We will see in this study that it contains no *major* themes that are not in Mark or Matthew, and its thematic structure is broadly similar to theirs, so we will follow the same basic outline as we have before. But the temporal framework of Luke's Gospel is more developed and nuanced than those in the other Gospels, and their central concept of the kingdom of God is recast by Luke in a rather different form. Also the material that is specific to Luke enables him to develop some of the key themes in new ways, especially perhaps in the area of discipleship.

There is one way in which Luke's Gospel is strikingly different from the other Synoptics, though, namely that it is the first book of a two-volume work. So some of its themes are only introduced here and are developed at much more length in the book of Acts, notably the Holy Spirit, Israel and the Gentiles, and the mission of the disciples, while Matthew's interest in the church is mirrored not here in Luke's first volume but in his second. There is not therefore very much to say on these themes in this study, and most of what there is echoes Mark and Matthew, but we will develop it significantly when we turn to Acts next time.

So this talk will follow much the same pattern as the last two and especially the one on Matthew. We will give some extended time to the major themes of the Gospel, and then offer a few practical applications for individual Christians and the churches.

### Key themes

#### *Nature of the Gospel*

At the very beginning of the Gospel Luke does something that Mark and Matthew do not: he includes a statement about the nature and purpose of his work. He presents it as an orderly, historical, narrative account of Jesus' life and ministry, produced by a careful and well-informed author. It is based on a reliable tradition that can be traced back to trustworthy eyewitnesses, and that has found expression in earlier writings; we can suppose that Luke has drawn on at least some of these. It is intended to confirm the certainty of the Christian instruction that its intended recipient has previously received. And although it does not say

as much in these opening verses, it is clearly designed to elicit a positive response from him and others.

### *Salvation history*

We have already seen that Mark's and Matthew's Gospels are set in what we have called a 'historical framework'. They both place the gospel events at a particular point in the story of God and his people, to give their readers a context for understanding what they are saying. Luke does the same, but his goal is more ambitious: his Gospel recounts what can be called a 'history of salvation' or 'salvation history', and he presents this as the key that unlocks the meaning of the whole of world history: Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian. That is why, for example, he prefaces his account of the ministries of John the Baptist and of Jesus with a list of Roman and Jewish leaders who were in office at the time.

This salvation history is unfolded by God according to his own saving plan. That plan is predetermined – God is not making it up as he goes along – and it is also invincible – neither human nor cosmic forces of evil can derail it. But it is not fixed in every detail; it does allow room for human response. For Luke this divine plan is now being brought to its final fulfilment, its eschatological or end-time fulfilment, in the work of Jesus Christ, and this is happening as a matter of divine necessity; Luke several times uses the little Greek word *dei* to emphasise that the gospel events *must* happen.

Mark and Matthew both work with a two-age framework: the Old Testament age of promise gives way in Jesus to the age of fulfilment. Luke's scheme is more complex: he divides history, and God's saving plan within history, into three sections instead. The first of these, as in the other Gospels, is the Old Testament period, the age of the law and the prophets. Luke does not emphasise the fulfilment of particular Old Testament texts in the way that Matthew does, but he believes no less that Israel's scriptures point beyond themselves to another phase of God's advancing purpose; that is, to Jesus and the salvation that he brings. The whole of the Old Testament revelation, the entirety of God's previous dealings with humanity and more intimately with Israel, all God's promises to his world and his people, find their fulfilment in Jesus.

The second period of history, the second stage of God's plan, consists of the ministry of Jesus. During this time, Jesus proclaims God's salvation through his preaching and teaching; he puts it into effect in his mighty works; and he achieves it, he makes it possible, through his death, resurrection and ascension. As we have just seen, all this happens in accordance with the Old Testament scriptures, and through it the hopes of God's people Israel are realised, their vocation is discharged and their practices are fulfilled.

At this point we should remind ourselves that Mark has very little to say about the life and mission of Jesus' disciples after his resurrection. Matthew is more explicit that during this subsequent time the biblical promises are still being fulfilled, and in new ways. But Luke, even just in his Gospel, goes much further than either of them: Jesus' departure from the world marks the start of a third, distinct stage of world history and of God's unfolding purpose, the era of the church and the Spirit. In this period, Jesus sends out the message of God's salvation from Jerusalem, to be preached and administered by his disciples in the power of the Spirit to all the nations. Their mission too is presented as the fulfilment of the Old Testament scriptures. And of course Luke does not merely anticipate this third age in his first volume; he goes on to recount its beginnings in some detail in his second volume.

But although Luke emphasises the many ways in which God's promise of salvation is fulfilled in Jesus and the church, he also makes clear that its fulfilment is only partial. It therefore points forward to what could be described as a fourth stage in God's plan, though this lies beyond the ordinary course of history: a future, complete and ultimate fulfilment of the promise, when evil will be fully and finally judged and God's people fully and finally liberated.

This will happen at Jesus' return. For a reason that we will touch on later, Luke underlines more strongly than Mark or Matthew the possibility of a significant delay before Jesus' coming, but he still affirms its imminence, in the sense that it could happen at any time.

Before we move on from this theme, we should briefly consider the figure of John the Baptist, who stands at the very end of the first age, the age of the law and the prophets. John's function is to introduce to Israel the preacher and agent of God's salvation and to prepare the people for his coming. But the era of salvation, the second age, is launched only by Jesus. Luke draws the line between the first and second eras more sharply than Mark and Matthew by referring to John's imprisonment at an earlier stage in the story and not including him in his account of Jesus' baptism. It is as though he wants to usher John more quickly from the scene to emphasise the dawn of the new age in Jesus.

### *Salvation*

So if Luke's Gospel is an account of the second phase of salvation history, what is the salvation that Jesus brings from God? The first point to make is that for Luke the context of salvation, and the condition for it, is the kingdom or reign of God. In no way does Luke abandon Mark and Matthew's idea of the kingdom: he uses the language frequently and in the same sense, to refer to God's end-time, saving rule that has broken into history in the coming of Jesus; he just develops the idea more explicitly and expansively in terms of salvation. Again like Mark and Matthew, Luke sees God's kingdom as both present and future: it has been inaugurated in Jesus' ministry, but it will be consummated only at his return.

As we will see in a moment, salvation in Luke's Gospel has many facets, so we need quite a broad definition to encompass it all. Perhaps we can say that for Luke salvation is the deliverance of human beings from all forms of evil, and their restoration to fullness of life in right relation to God; that is, under his reign. This understanding helps to explain the conflict that is generated by Jesus' ministry. Because he is liberating people from the power of evil and transferring them to a different authority, his work is vigorously opposed by spiritual forces of wickedness and their human agents. God's salvation necessarily involves the plundering of those cosmic powers that hold human beings in bondage.

For Luke salvation involves firstly the forgiveness of sins, which is the cancelling of the debt that is incurred to God by people's evil deeds. And secondly, as we have just seen, it includes freedom from the control of evil spiritual powers. These two elements are also part of Mark and Matthew's understanding of God's kingdom; but Luke emphasises a third aspect of salvation more strongly than they do: namely, the gift of the Spirit. Of course the pouring out of the Spirit on the church does not happen until Jesus is exalted to heaven, and it is described only in Acts. But while the Gospel does not say *much* more about the Spirit than the others do, Luke does draw more attention to certain aspects of his work and anticipates a more general gift of the Spirit to Jesus' disciples. We will say a little more about the Spirit later.

We can touch only briefly on the many more specific ways in which Luke describes God's gift of salvation in Jesus. These include the gift of peace, which is not so much the absence of conflict as wholeness of life in all its parts. Then there is release for the oppressed, perhaps especially those troubled by evil spirits; healing for the sick, which embraces a wide range of diseases; and recovery of sight for the blind. Salvation also generates a human response: it leads to joy and praise, and to fellowship and unity, which are wide enough to embrace people whom society regards as unacceptable. And although Luke does not make much of this, salvation also includes eternal life after Jesus' return.

An aspect of salvation that Luke highlights much more than Mark or Matthew do is that it is especially for the socially disadvantaged and despised. He shows special interest in the

poor, in women, in tax collectors and sinners, in Samaritans, and in the physically afflicted: all groups who lack status and are therefore receptive to Jesus' message. And at the same time, the Gospel passes judgment on the well-advantaged and respected in society, who largely reject that message. So for Luke salvation also involves what is often called the reversal of status: the exalting of the humble and the humbling of the exalted, as expressed in Mary's famous song in chapter 1.

There are two final points to make on the nature of salvation in Luke's Gospel. The first is that its blessings are not achieved by political, social or economic reform, let alone revolution, and that Jesus' message therefore poses no threat to Roman order and peace. This is another theme that is anticipated here but is much more developed in Acts. And secondly, despite Luke's concern for the sick and his strong affirmation of Jesus' healing power, the physical restoration provided now is only a limited and temporary foretaste of a deliverance yet to come. This is a necessary consequence of the dual nature of God's kingdom as present and future: it is experienced now in powerful ways, but its fullness is still awaited.

### *The identity of Jesus*

Salvation requires a saviour, and a major theme of Luke's Gospel (as also of Mark's and Matthew's) is the identity of Jesus. We should note first that for Luke God is the ultimate saviour; it is he who sends and authenticates Jesus as the saviour; and it is he who is active in Jesus to accomplish salvation. But then as we have seen already in connection with salvation history, Jesus exercises the role of saviour in his earthly ministry: he proclaims and effects the good news of God's salvation in his preaching and teaching and his mighty works, and he accomplishes or secures it in his death, resurrection and ascension. Of course he also goes on exercising his saving role after he is exalted, but that part of the story is told only in Acts.

Last time we looked at Matthew's understanding of Jesus in several dimensions: some of them titles, some of them aspects of his work. We are going to do the same with Luke, but in light of his Gospel's emphasis on salvation, Jesus' title of saviour should probably be prioritised. That is to say: all the other roles that Jesus fulfils in Luke's Gospel are ways in which he fulfils his ministry as saviour. As in Matthew, those roles also condition each other: so, for example, Jesus is the Messiah or king, but the way in which he discharges that office is partly determined by his parallel vocation as the suffering servant foretold by Isaiah. So these various dimensions of his identity should be seen as a whole. With Matthew we had twelve; for Luke we have a more modest seven, though of course these are not exhaustive.

Firstly, then, Jesus appears in Luke's Gospel as a prophet. He effectively claims this designation for himself from the beginning, when he associates himself with the calling of the prophet in Isaiah who was anointed to bring good news, and he affirms it in other places, while it is also ascribed to him by the people. But he is more than just any prophet: he is the prophet like Moses, whose coming belongs to the end-time era of salvation; and he also resembles the great prophets Elijah and Elisha, who proclaimed God's word and performed powerful works.

Secondly, for Luke Jesus is a teacher. He is frequently addressed as such, by disciples and outsiders alike, and teaching is one of his core activities, the first one that is named in this Gospel. As in Matthew, he brings God's instruction with authority; he proclaims God's message of salvation and calls for the appropriate response to it. And as in both Mark and Matthew, special attention is drawn to his teaching in parables; we saw earlier that Luke alone includes many of Jesus' best-loved stories.

Thirdly, Luke presents Jesus as the Messiah and son of David. These titles indicate that he is the person whom God has anointed to be king over his people Israel, and later of the

whole world, and who mediates God's reign and his salvation. But at the same time, Jesus' kingship is fully realised only through his suffering and resurrection, and it can be understood only in this light. The title of Messiah has political overtones for many of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries, but Luke firmly rejects these.

Fourthly, for Luke Jesus is also the son of God. We have seen before that this title is not an affirmation of Jesus' deity; it is applied elsewhere in Scripture to angels and kings and to Israel as a whole. It can also be used as another name for the Messiah, who was not expected to be divine. Its significance in the Gospel is drawn out most clearly in the temptation scene, where it points to Jesus as uniquely related to God and fully obedient to his plan.

Fifthly, Jesus is portrayed in this Gospel as the son of man; this is his most frequent designation for himself. Luke follows Mark and Matthew in giving this title a complex meaning: for him Jesus is a human being who bears special authority from God, but who is also destined to be rejected and to suffer; and at the same time he is a heavenly figure modelled on the son of man in Daniel chapter 7, who is going to appear again to execute final, eschatological judgment.

Sixthly, Luke portrays Jesus as the servant of the Lord who is described in the book of the prophet Isaiah. This figure can be associated with a range of qualities and activities; this Gospel draws attention to Jesus' service of others and his suffering on their behalf. But in Isaiah the servant is also vindicated after his suffering, and this is Jesus' destiny too. The image counterbalances the more triumphant titles such as Messiah and son of God, and it underlines that Jesus fulfils his royal function by walking the way of the cross.

And finally, in this Gospel Jesus is the Lord. Luke seems to favour this title more than Mark and Matthew do, in that he uses it in his own narrative ('the Lord answered', 'the Lord appointed'), not just when he is quoting what others say. It is perhaps his strongest way of indicating that Jesus bears God's authority, but we should also note that his lordship is bestowed on him in stages; he comes to exercise it fully only after his resurrection and ascension.

These dimensions of Jesus' identity give us a good overall picture of how Luke understands him. There is more that could be said, but we will content ourselves with just one further point. The Gospel presents Jesus as a fully human being; indeed, his 'humanity' in the widest sense is one of its most attractive features. But he is also, unmistakably, a transcendent figure; he is revealed as such in his virginal conception, in his uniquely Spirit-guided ministry, in his special relation to his Father, in his resurrection and ascension, in his new place of authority and anticipated outpouring of the Spirit, and in his promised return as king and judge. Even if Luke stops short of identifying Jesus as God – and some would say that he does not – he certainly sees him as much more than *just* a human being.

#### *The death and resurrection of Jesus*

Like Mark and Matthew, Luke has very little explicit to say about the death of Jesus. In fact he is notorious for his apparent lack of interest in *how* this event accomplishes salvation; he does not even include the statement in the other two Gospels that the son of man came to give his life as a ransom for many. But the point should not be overstated: Luke certainly sees Jesus' death as a necessary part of God's saving plan, and his omission of the ransom saying is balanced out by his emphasis on Jesus as the righteous sufferer, whose death inaugurates a new covenant in which sins are forgiven.

Jesus' resurrection is associated in Luke's Gospel with his taking up to heaven by God, which Mark and Matthew do not recount. Together these two events comprise Jesus' exaltation to glory as Lord, and they give him authority to put God's purpose into further

effect, by pouring out the Spirit on his disciples and launching them on their mission. All this is set out in Luke's resurrection narrative in the last chapter of the Gospel, and it is then worked out in his account of the church's beginnings in Acts; perhaps it is because he is going to write that second volume that he pays so much attention to this theme.

### *The return of Jesus*

We have talked already about the return of Jesus in the context of salvation history, and we do not need to cover that ground again. In any case, Luke's understanding of the event is much the same as that of Mark and Matthew, which we have considered before. His most distinctive contribution is to make a clearer separation between the fall of Jerusalem and Jesus' coming than is made in the other two Gospels, though he does not pull them apart altogether. Luke certainly wants his readers to be ready for the end, but whereas Matthew may want to heighten such expectations so they stay eager, Luke seems more concerned to damp them down. As we will see more clearly in Acts, he is most interested in guiding the churches in their life and mission in the present, which could potentially be diminished by *too* much focus on a future event of entirely unknown date, however important it undoubtedly is.

### *The Holy Spirit*

The book of Acts has a lot to say about the Spirit, but this is anticipated in Luke's Gospel only in outline. Luke takes over Mark and Matthew's teaching without adding much, but he does give the content a distinctive spin. Thus the work of the Spirit both reveals that the second age of the world has arrived with Jesus and then puts it into effect through Jesus. That is to say that the Spirit's activity is both empowering and prophetic: his power initiates and sustains the life and ministry of Jesus, and his word proclaims and interprets them. The Spirit is also promised to Jesus' disciples for their mission, which implies that he will fulfil the same functions for them in the third stage of God's plan as he has for Jesus in the second. Much more on that next time!

### *Israel and the Gentiles*

The theme of Israel and the Gentiles is also developed more fully in Acts than it is in Luke's Gospel, but again the earlier work foreshadows the later one. And again, Luke's teaching on the subject here is substantially the same as in Mark and Matthew.

For Luke, the mission of Jesus is first to Israel; his task is first to redeem and restore the Jewish people, the Old Testament people of God. But from the ministry of John the Baptist onwards, it is clear that this process will not happen automatically or indiscriminately; it will not do for the Jews to say that they have Abraham as their father and that they will share in God's promised salvation simply on that basis. The message of Jesus requires recognition and response from every person within Israel, and only those who offer it are able to share in the blessings that it promises and effects.

So as Luke's story proceeds, we find the good news of salvation creating a division within Israel. Some Jews accept it and begin to experience the salvation that we described earlier: forgiveness of sins, freedom from evil spiritual powers, wholeness of life, healing from disease, joy and praise, and so on. Others, however, especially among Israel's leaders, reject it either immediately or eventually, and so compound the sin from which they and the nation need to be redeemed. They therefore exclude themselves from salvation and incur judgment now and in the future. And the repudiation of Jesus by Israel as a whole causes it to lose its exclusive privilege as God's people and brings destruction on the nation and its temple.

During the ministry of Jesus, Israel – the people of God – is (re)constituted as those who accept his message and receive his salvation. The later extension of that salvation to the Gentiles is also anticipated, as individual non-Jews share in the blessings of his work by associating themselves with Israel, and as the risen Jesus endorses the preaching of

repentance and forgiveness to all nations. And although Luke's Gospel has little to say about the church, it does indicate that the nucleus of this redefined people of God are the twelve disciples or apostles chosen by Jesus.

### *Discipleship*

As we have just seen, for Luke the message that Jesus proclaims demands a response, and receipt of the salvation that it offers is conditional upon that response. While much of the Gospel's teaching on discipleship is very similar to that in Mark and Matthew, it also has some distinctive emphases.

The first and most basic imperative of the Gospel is to repent, or perhaps we might say to be converted. This is a fairly simple concept: it means turning away from one's sins to serve God. The second essential is faith, which is directed especially towards Jesus, and is a more complex idea involving recognition of who he is, dependence upon him for salvation from God, and allegiance to him.

It follows from this that discipleship in Luke is a matter of living under the rule of God and being accountable to him. Salvation results from the establishing of God's kingdom, and as subjects of that kingdom disciples must properly shape their lives according to its standards in order to share its benefits. Those standards are defined by Jesus, so it also follows that discipleship involves conformity to him, and this has three elements: obeying his teaching, following in his way – which implies imitation of his lifestyle – and accepting his vocation of self-denial and suffering, and perhaps even death.

So a significant portion of the teaching of Jesus in Luke's Gospel is devoted to defining an ethical character and lifestyle for Jesus' disciples. As in Matthew and Mark, the two love commands, for God and the neighbour, are foundational. The rest of the Old Testament law is still valid, but only as interpreted by and through Jesus, and Luke does not give it the same prominence in his Gospel as Matthew does, though he will develop the theme quite extensively in the book of Acts.

More distinctive to Luke's Gospel is Jesus' teaching on poverty and wealth. Substantial parts of the middle section are devoted to this theme and include some apparently very radical demands. Generosity to the poor and needy is required of Jesus' followers, but Luke goes further in presenting wealth as a stumbling block to discipleship, which needs to be laid aside to enable a proper and exclusive dedication to Jesus.

We can only mention briefly a few of the other discipleship themes. First among these is prayer, which is emphasised more strongly by Luke than by Mark or Matthew. Disciples' practice of prayer is based on Jesus' example and teaching, and it is an essential expression of their dependence on God. They are also expected to continue steadfast in their faith in the face of inevitable opposition, recognising that Jesus' coming has brought not peace but division, within Israel as a whole and even within households. And as in the other Synoptic Gospels, they are to live in constant readiness for Jesus' return, even if Luke is the most focused of the three authors on the present.

### *Mission*

Mission is another theme that is developed at length in the book of Acts, and there will be much more to say about it there; but again, it appears in germinal form in Luke's Gospel. As in Mark and Matthew, the chosen twelve disciples are sent out by him to share in his mission of proclaiming and enacting the divine message of salvation. Interestingly, however, Luke also includes an account of Jesus commissioning a further, larger group of disciples for this work. Similarly, at the end of the Gospel the task of witnessing to Jesus' suffering and resurrection is given to the Eleven and 'those with them'. As we will see in Acts, the twelve apostles still have a unique role, but others also take part in the church's mission.

## Applications

So as we draw to a close, let us highlight a few possible applications of themes from Luke's Gospel to our lives as Christians and churches today.

We can recall firstly the nature and purpose of the work, as defined in Luke's opening statement, and note that we have here a trustworthy account of Jesus' life and ministry. Of course Luke is an ancient and not a modern historian, and he re-arranges and re-writes and goes beyond his sources much more freely than scholars would today; but nonetheless he has provided us with a secure historical underpinning for our Christian faith. And that faith is not completely distinct from the content of the Gospel, as though he were just offering us evidence for some timeless idea, such as 'God loves you and wants a relationship with you'. No, the story of Jesus is an integral part of our faith, indeed the foundation of it; so it matters even more that it be laid on firm historical ground.

Secondly, we have seen that Luke presents his account as a history of salvation and sees this as the key for understanding the whole of world history, or we could say the grid through which history should be interpreted. This perspective should prevent us from attaching too much significance to contemporary national and international events, from investing them with an ultimate importance that they do not possess. All the doings of governments and their leaders, from the Emperor Tiberius to Donald Trump, have only a secondary importance, as events that God has incorporated into his saving purpose through Christ, events that further his purpose despite the occasional or frequent attempts of their human agents to frustrate it. And thus Luke's teaching also exposes the demands of such powers for ultimate trust and loyalty for the futile pretensions that they are.

Thirdly, we noticed the centrality and richness of the idea of salvation within Luke's Gospel. If it can be summarised as something like 'comprehensive deliverance from evil and restoration to full life in right relation to God', that process embraces its principal components of forgiveness, freedom and the gift of the Spirit, which in turn break down into various more specific elements. Luke perhaps raises our expectations of the difference Jesus can make to our lives in the present to a higher level than any other New Testament author, and his teaching can properly encourage us to be bold in our prayers for ourselves and each other. And yet even this Gospel acknowledges that the fullness of God's kingdom awaits Jesus' return, and that the salvation we experience now is partial and limited, and some of its blessings only temporary. So we should be neither surprised nor anxious about that.

Fourthly and finally, we have to reckon in some way with Luke's often searching and demanding teaching on poverty and wealth. The requirement of generosity to those in need is fairly basic to Christian discipleship, even if it is not always easy to fulfil. But the idea of having to divest ourselves of our possessions, completely or even in part, in order to be a true disciple of Jesus alone is one with which most of us have probably not come to terms. To be sure, the surface meaning of some of Luke's statements on the subject needs to be qualified by other perspectives, from his writings and elsewhere in the New Testament. But these should not be allowed wholly to blunt the radical edge of his teaching, at least not if we want to take it seriously.

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So there we have our study on the Gospel of Luke. Please do leave any comments you may have on my YouTube page. Next time we will move on to the next part of Luke's project: the Acts of the Apostles.

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