

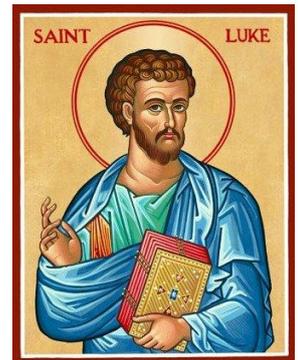
Introducing the Gospel of Luke

The Gospel of Luke is the third of the so-called Synoptic Gospels in our Bible that each tell the story of Jesus from a similar perspective (*viz. Matthew, Mark and Luke*). Unlike the other Gospel writers, however, Luke does not finish his story with the resurrection of Jesus but continues the story for another generation, telling how the followers of Jesus took his message from Jerusalem to the heart of the Greco-Roman world in Rome. We know the second part of Luke's story as the book of *Acts* (*The Acts of the Apostles*). Together Luke and Acts make up around 20% of our New Testament.

Some of the best known parts of the Jesus story are unique to Luke – including the Christmas story, the parable of the Good Samaritan, the parable of the Prodigal Son, the story of Pentecost and Paul's dramatic encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road. Luke's presentation of the Jesus story is also unique in that he is most likely the only NT writer who is not a Jew.

Who was Luke?

Luke was a second generation Christian and travelling companion of the apostle Paul who mentions Luke by name in Colossians 4:14 (where he is called the beloved physician), in 2 Tim 4:11 and in Philemon 1:24. It also appears likely that Luke was physically present for several incidents in *Acts* as the narration changes from third person to first person (we) at Acts 16:10 (suggesting that Luke became part of the emerging church at Philippi) and again at Acts 20:5 (which suggests that Luke accompanied Paul on his final journey to Rome).



Luke appears to be well educated and writes very good Greek (the language of the New Testament). The introductory verses of the Gospel (Luke 1:1-4) are written in classical Greek style, as opposed to the remainder of the NT that is written in koine or common Greek. Luke has apparently done thorough research before writing and sought out those who were eye-witnesses (Luke 1:2), possibly including Mary, the mother of Jesus. He claims to have written an orderly account whose style is a blend of biography and history – and of course theology. His stated aim in writing is so that his patron Theophilus (Luke 1:3, Acts 1:1) and other readers may know the truth of what they have been taught as followers of Jesus.

Luke's telling of the Jesus story

Luke's story follows the basic outline of *Mark*, but introduces the story with the parallel infancy narratives of Jesus and John the Baptist, which provide an origin story for each of these key characters. Luke also adds a genealogy for Jesus, although this differs from the genealogy in Matthew. Luke fleshes out Mark's story with multiple examples of Jesus' teaching and many more stories of healing that may have appealed to Luke if he was a physician. He also adds several resurrection appearances of Jesus and ends the Gospel with the ascension of Jesus. It's as if Luke is answering some of the unanswered questions from Mark's Gospel – such as where did Jesus come from? and what happened after Jesus was killed?

The biggest change from Mark, and the other Gospels, is the addition of part 2 of the story, the book of *Acts*, which starts with a longer telling of Jesus' ascension in Jerusalem and ends 30 years later with Paul preaching unhindered in Rome. One of the central messages of *Acts* is how a Jewish movement focused on Jesus as the Jewish Messiah became a worldwide multi-cultural movement that included many Gentiles (i.e. non-Jews) including of course Luke himself. Our appreciation of Luke-Acts as a two part story is often lost due to the insertion of the Gospel of John in the middle.

Luke's key themes

One of the themes in Luke is that **the events surrounding Jesus are unfolding according to the knowledge and plan of God**. He commonly uses the Greek word *dei* (it is necessary) to explain why something is happening, especially in relation to the rejection and death of Jesus (e.g. Luke 9:22, 24:44). Luke supports these claims through quotations and allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures (out OT) that he places on the lips of key characters. Many of these come from the prophetic book of Isaiah and show that the events of Jesus' life follow the patterns and predictions of Isaiah (e.g. that Jesus is the Spirit anointed figure from Isaiah 61:1 who preaches good news to the poor).

Another theme is that **the gospel message is for everyone**. In keeping with the other Synoptic Gospels, Luke shows Jesus working with and accepting women, children, the sick and those from dubious professions. Luke gives a higher profile to women who both support his ministry and who figure in his interactions (e.g. story of Martha and Mary). Luke especially focuses on God's acceptance of Gentiles (non-Jews) that is one of the key messages in the book of Acts.

A further theme for Luke is that of **discipleship**, what it means for a person to be a follower of Jesus. This happens partly through the example of Jesus (e.g. Luke emphasises the prayer life of Jesus), partly through the commands of Jesus (e.g. at the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus urges the hearers to go and do likewise) and partly through the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit, especially in Acts (e.g. the choice of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13 occurs in a setting of worship and prayer where the Holy Spirit's voice is heard).

A few brief highlights ...

Mary's Magnificat is a stirring call to justice and reversal (Luke 1:47-55)

The prominent roles given to older saints Simeon and Anna, Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1-2)

The story of the birth of Jesus which is our classic Christmas story (Luke 2:1-20)

Jesus preaching at Nazareth which foreshadows his later rejection and death (Luke 4:16-30)

The parable of the Good Samaritan told in response to the question 'Who is my neighbour?' (Luke 10:29-37)

The grace and hospitality of God illustrated in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)

The mysterious presence of the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)

The story of the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and its aftermath (Acts 2:1-41)

The irrepressible spread of the gospel message amid great personal suffering, which is the way of discipleship, as told in story after story in Acts and modelled on the passion of Jesus

The background to Paul's extensive ministry that provides background to his letters (Acts 13-20)

The unfinished story of the gospel that hearers and readers of Acts are invited to complete (Acts 28)

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