



# The Gospel according to Luke

## ORIENTING DATA FOR LUKE

- **Content:** the story of Jesus as part 1 of Luke-Acts, which is the story of the salvation of “Israel,” which Christ and the Spirit have brought about; part 1 begins with the announcement of Jesus’ birth by the Spirit and carries through to his ascension
- **Author:** according to very early tradition, Luke the physician and sometime companion of the apostle Paul (see Col 4:14), the only Gentile author in the Bible
- **Date:** uncertain; scholars are divided between a date before the death of Paul (ca. A.D. 64; see Acts 28:30–31) and one after the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70, because of his use of Mark)
- **Recipient(s):** Theophilus is otherwise unknown; in keeping with such prefaces in Greco-Roman literature, he was probably the patron of Luke-Acts, thus underwriting its publication; the implied readers are Gentile Christians, whose place in God’s story is ensured through the work of Jesus Christ and the Spirit
- **Emphases:** God’s Messiah has come to his people, Israel, with the promised inclusion of Gentiles; Jesus came to save the lost, including every kind of marginalized person whom traditional religion would put outside the boundaries; Jesus’ ministry is carried out under the power of the Holy Spirit; the necessity of Jesus’ death and resurrection (which fulfilled Old Testament promises) for the forgiveness of sins

## OVERVIEW OF LUKE

If Mark is one of those who cannot tell a story badly, Luke is the one who can tell it to perfection. His vision is all-embracing: The story of Jesus, now placed in the context of world history (Luke 2:1; 3:1–2), includes the Spirit's ongoing ministry in the church as well. So you need to read part 1 in connection with part 2, as Luke himself intended, and not just in the context of the other three Gospels (thus we will guide you through Acts in the next chapter, out of canonical order). Luke's story is thus in two major parts: (1) how the good news of God's salvation for all people began, through the power of the Spirit, with Jesus in Galilee and in Jerusalem (Luke's Gospel), and (2) how the good news of God's salvation through Jesus was, by the power of the Spirit, carried by the apostles from Jerusalem to Rome (Acts).

Chapters 1 and 2 of Luke both introduce the story and anticipate all its major themes and concerns—the links with Old Testament promises; the Davidic kingly role of Jesus; the restoration of Israel; the inclusion of Gentiles; God's concern for the poor; the role of the Holy Spirit; the anticipated opposition; the joy caused by the good news about Jesus.

In 3:1–4:13 the ministries of John and Jesus are linked, as anticipated in chapter 1. Jesus is presented to Israel through his baptism and testing; he is also linked to the Gentile mission by a genealogy that takes him back through Abraham to Adam.

The rest of the Gospel is in three parts, set off by geographical notations. In 4:14–9:50 Jesus teaches and heals in Galilee. The introductory narrative of a Sabbath in Nazareth (4:16–30) serves as a prototype for the rest of the story—fulfillment of Old Testament promises; the Spirit descending on the Messiah; good news to the poor; inclusion of Gentiles; rejection by some of Israel.

In 9:51 Jesus "resolutely set out for Jerusalem"; he does not arrive there until 19:45. Although regularly portrayed in this long section as on the way to Jerusalem (10:38; 13:22; 17:11; 18:31), Jesus still gathers disciples around him, challenges all with his teachings, rejects a pharisaic understanding of God, and in turn is finally rejected by the religious and political authorities.

Finally in Jerusalem (19:45–24:53), Jesus is rejected by the Jewish leaders and is crucified. But the crucifixion and resurrection were of divine necessity—evidence of God's faithfulness to his people. So part

1 ends with the ascension and on a note of joy, as the disciples stay at the temple, awaiting part 2.

### **SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING LUKE**

Luke's primary concern (in both parts) is with the story of salvation—God's salvation of "Israel," with its promised inclusion of the Gentiles. Salvation for Luke means God's acceptance and forgiveness of sinners, which, picking up an Old Testament theme, is especially expressed as "good news to the poor" (4:18; 7:22; cf. 1:51–53)—all those who have been marginalized by society at large and especially by the religious power brokers. They are the "lost" (19:10) and include wealthy tax collectors (19:1–9), "the [economically] poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind" (14:13; cf. 16:19–31), a Samaritan (17:11–19; cf. 10:25–37), and women (7:36–50; 8:2–3; 10:38–42; cf. the three women in chs. 1–2). Be looking for these as you read. It also includes the Gentiles, but that dimension of the story is reserved for Acts. Thus in part 1 the universalizing of salvation is vertical, covering every strata of society within Israel; in part 2 it is horizontal, focusing especially on the Gentiles and the march of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome.

Thus in Luke's Gospel Jesus comes both as Israel's kingly Messiah (the announcement to Mary [1:32–33] is full of the language of the Davidic covenant from 2 Sam 7:14, 16) and as the one who has come to help God's "servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors" (Luke 1:54–55; cf. 1:68–75; 2:30–32). Luke begins part 2 with the disciples' question, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

It is in this context that the temple (Zion) plays a significant role in Luke-Acts. Not only is the Messiah presented—and recognized—in the temple (Luke 2:21–38), but the only narrative of Jesus' childhood in the Gospels (2:41–52) places him in the temple courts having discussions with the teachers. This anticipates his return to the temple to teach in 20:1–21:38, after he had "cleansed" it (19:45–48). Fittingly, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the first proclaiming of the gospel happen at the temple in Acts 2–6. But the God who has thus returned to his earthly temple has also announced its coming destruction (Luke 21:20–24); in this new era of salvation God no longer dwells in a temple made by hands (Acts 7:48–50). And that leads to the other side of the story—that many in Israel, especially the "religious" and their leaders, reject Jesus, thus fulfilling

Simeon's prophecy (Luke 2:34)—“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against.” This begins in the programmatic narrative in 4:16–30 and continues throughout the Gospel, climaxing at the end with the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. It becomes a major theme in Acts.

In this regard, watch especially for the significant role the books of Isaiah and the Psalms play in Luke's presentation. Isaiah's concern for the nations in the context of Jewish rejection frames the whole of Luke-Acts, beginning with Simeon's echo of Isaiah 49:6 (Luke 2:32), followed by Luke's own citation of Isaiah 40:3–5 regarding John the Baptist (Luke 3:4–6, “and all people will see God's salvation”), and finally with Jesus' citation of Isaiah 61:1–2 as he begins his public ministry (Luke 4:18–19). At the very end (Acts 28:26–27), Diaspora Jewish rejection of Jesus in Rome is seen to fulfill Isaiah 6:9–10 (cf. the citation of Isa 49:6 in the significant speech by Paul in Acts 13:47). At the same time Isaiah's suffering servant is the key to understanding Jesus' earthly ministry (Luke 22:37; Acts 8:32–33; cf. Mark), while Jesus' coming to the temple as Israel's rightful King and his present exaltation as Lord are seen in light of Psalms 2, 118, and 110 (see Luke 20:17, 42–43; Acts 2:34–35; 4:11, 25–26; cf. 7:56; cf. Hebrews).

Although salvation comes through Jesus, Luke especially emphasizes the role the Holy Spirit plays in God's salvation. You will notice how the Spirit predominates in the events in chapters 1–2 of Luke's Gospel, as well as in the ministry of Jesus himself. Everything Jesus does by way of preparation (3:1–4:11) is guided by the Spirit. His ministry begins with the citation of Isaiah 61:1, “the Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me” (4:18). That Luke intends his readers mentally to insert “by the Spirit” throughout this narrative about his earthly ministry is made clear by Peter in Acts 10:38—“how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.” This theme is thoroughgoing in Acts.

You should also note the emphasis throughout the Gospel on prayer and joy. Jesus himself prays at every major point in the story, and Luke includes more *teaching* on prayer than all the other Gospels. And salvation as “good news for the poor” causes people regularly to glorify God with great joy. Here is one Gentile who is deeply grateful to be included in God's salvation of his people Israel.

## A WALK THROUGH LUKE

### *The Story Begins (1:1–4:13)*

#### □ 1:1–4 *The Prologue*

Luke's preface follows a well-known literary convention, where an author sets forth the *reason* for his narrative, usually in light of what others have done and almost always addressing his patron as someone to be honored. Luke himself learned of the events about Jesus from some who were eyewitnesses (including Mary? see 2:51); he also knew of earlier such narratives (Mark was one of these, which he used in writing his own account).

#### □ 1:5–2:52 *The Announcement and Birth of Jesus, the Messiah*

Four things are important to watch for here: (1) Luke deliberately ties the story of Jesus to Israel; for example, the story of Elizabeth and John echoes that of Hannah (1 Sam 1–2), the mother of Samuel—the prophet who anointed David; the Messiah's birth is announced to Mary in the language of the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:14, 16); Mary bursts into a song that echoes the Psalter, as does John's father, Zechariah, at John's birth. God is at last "remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants" (Luke 1:54–55), to raise up "a horn of salvation for us in the house of David" (1:69). The narrative concludes (2:52) in words that echo the growth of young Samuel (1 Sam 2:26).

(2) All the people involved are among the poor of Israel. Thus (in chapter 2), Jesus is born in a manger because there was no guest room; his birth is announced to lowly shepherds; at Jesus' and Mary's "purification," his parents offer the sacrifice of the poorest of the poor; a widow prophesies about Jesus. (3) Simeon's blessing and prophecy are especially programmatic: Jesus will be the glory of Israel, he will bring salvation to the nations, and he will "cause the falling and rising of many in Israel." (4) Luke especially emphasizes Jesus' humanity (see 2:52); the miraculous element is regularly attributed to the work of the Spirit. The whole story develops in this mode.

#### □ 3:1–4:13 *Jesus' Preparation for Ministry*

Already linked to Jesus in chapter 1, John the Baptist comes on the scene announcing the new exodus. But John is not the Messiah; rather, he points people to the coming of the Messiah (and his baptism with

the Holy Spirit and fire). Jesus is baptized and is himself anointed by the Spirit. After a genealogy (tracing Jesus back to Adam), the Spirit leads him into the desert to be tested (as was Israel following its “baptism” through the Red Sea). And so Jesus is prepared for his public ministry.

***The Ministry of Jesus in Galilee (4:14–9:50)***

In this first major section of his Gospel, Luke weaves together a series of short narratives that illustrate Jesus’ powerful ministry on behalf of the poor and the captives; also included are several illustrations of his teachings, with emphasis on hearing God’s word and putting it into practice (8:21). You will see how Luke holds the narrative together by use of repeated short summaries that help to keep you focused on the greatness of Jesus and on his bringing the kingdom (4:14–15, 44; 5:15; 7:17; 8:1–3). Also woven through the narrative, but not in a prominent role, is the beginning of opposition (5:17–21, 30; 6:7; 7:31–35, 44–49).

□ **4:14–44** ***Good News for Nazareth and Capernaum***

After an introductory summary (vv. 14–15), Luke uses Jesus’ visit to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth to introduce the whole of his ministry (vv. 16–30)—fulfilling Old Testament promises; Spirit-empowered; with good news for the poor, including release of captives; justified by two Old Testament stories of the inclusion of Gentiles, resulting in opposition. Note especially that the opposition is the result of Jesus’ reminding some Jews of God’s prior inclusion of Gentiles (thus anticipating the story in Acts).

This is followed by two short narratives illustrating Jesus’ powerful ministry on behalf of the poor and captives. Thus in his driving out demons and healing the sick (4:31–44), Jesus, the (humble) Divine Warrior, engages Satan in the holy war on Satan’s own supposed turf (see 4:6; cf. 10:18).

□ **5:1–6:11** ***Mission and Controversy***

After calling his first disciples (5:1–11), Jesus’ healing of a man with leprosy causes Jesus’ fame to spread (vv. 12–16). It also sets up a series of conflict stories—on Jesus’ right to forgive sins (vv. 17–26), his eating with sinners (vv. 27–32), his disciples’ not fasting (vv. 33–39), and his breaking traditional Sabbath rules (6:1–11).

□ **6:12–49** *Jesus Instructs His Disciples and Others*

Jesus now appoints the Twelve (Israel again!), whom he instructs (v. 20) in the presence of others (vv. 17–19) on the nature of discipleship. Note the emphases—on the humble poor, who are persecuted for Jesus’ sake; on loving and not judging; and finally on obedience.

□ **7:1–50** *Good News to the Poor*

Again Jesus shows compassion on the poor, in this case a Gentile (vv. 1–10), a widow (vv. 11–17), and a town prostitute (vv. 36–50). Note that the second story concludes with the exclamation that “a great prophet has appeared among us” (v. 16), which then leads to the narrative about Jesus and John the Baptist (vv. 18–35). Note further how the Pharisees’ rejection of John (v. 30) leads to the final story in this section, where a view of the Pharisees emerges that will become thoroughgoing in the next section.

□ **8:1–56** *Authentic Hearing, Fear, and Faith*

Luke now presents Jesus as a teacher of parables, so as to emphasize authentic hearing (the kind that leads to obedience, vv. 1–21). This is followed by three miracle stories (with four miracles), demonstrating Jesus’ power over creation, demons, death, and uncleanness (see comments on Lev 11:1–16:34, p. 47). Note also how the first and last of these stories pick up the themes of *fear* and *faith*.

□ **9:1–50** *The Identity of Jesus and Authentic Discipleship*

Watch for the significant role the Twelve play in this final series of narratives, beginning with Jesus’ sending them out for ministry (vv. 1–9). The larger section then concludes with the confession of Peter and the first two predictions of Jesus’ death (9:18–27; 9:43b–50), plus the transfiguration (vv. 28–36), where Jesus talks with Moses and Elijah about the “exodus” (vv. 30–31; see TNIV note) he is about to accomplish in Jerusalem.

**On the Way to Jerusalem (9:51–19:44)**

As you read this long travel narrative, you will find that even though the entire narrative is set “on the way to Jerusalem,” that thread is often let go (among other things, the mission of the seventy-two and the events of two different Sabbaths are included). Luke probably intends us to

read this section in light of the events already predicted, which are soon to transpire in Jerusalem. Also watch for several previous themes woven throughout: (1) the coming of God's salvation to all people, especially the poor and the lost; (2) regular, and sometimes harsh, confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish leaders; (3) the closely related theme that Jesus is going to Jerusalem to suffer and be killed; and (4) the formation of the disciples, especially preparing them for the time after his departure.

□ **9:51–11:13** *Discipleship: Hearing and Doing the Word*

Notice how much of this material is aimed at instructing the disciples. Their attitude toward Samaritan opposition (9:51–55) is eventually challenged by Jesus' parable in 10:25–37, whose point is to demolish the question "Who is my neighbor?" Between these stand "the cost of discipleship" (9:57–62) and the mission of the seventy-two (10:1–24). Then comes the story of how one truly welcomes Jesus (vv. 38–42, by "listening to what [Jesus] said") as well as instruction on prayer (11:1–13).

□ **11:14–54** *Opposition to Jesus*

In the next narratives, Jesus' authority is called into question first by some in the crowds over his driving out demons and then through their demanding a sign (vv. 15–16), to which Jesus responds in verses 17–32, and second by the Pharisees (vv. 37–38), to which Jesus responds with a series of woes on the Pharisees and their teachers (vv. 39–54).

□ **12:1–13:9** *Discipleship and Preparedness*

Note the two emphases in this series of materials: (1) not pursuing wealth, but being content with what one has and being generous to the poor, and (2) vigilance in light of the coming eschatological crisis.

□ **13:10–17:10** *Jesus in Opposition to Pharisaism*

You will see that this next series begins with a controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees over his showing compassion on the Sabbath (13:10–17). After two parables about the kingdom of God (vv. 18–21), he then responds to the question of who will be saved by implying that many will not (vv. 22–30), which in turn leads to his sorrow over Jerusalem (vv. 31–35). Following this, watch for two recurring themes



in Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees—(1) their attitude toward the poor and the lost and (2) their attitude toward money (14:1–16:31). Note that the greatly loved parable of the prodigal son indicates that what is at stake between Jesus and the Pharisees is their opposing views of God (not a slaveholder [15:29], but a gracious, forgiving Father). The section then concludes with further instruction to the disciples on forgiveness and faithful servanthood (17:1–10).

□ **17:11–19:27** *Responding to the Presence of the Kingdom*

Note how this final series begins with the reminder that Jesus is “on his way to Jerusalem.” At issue is the proper response to the presence of the kingdom—thankfulness (17:11–19, involving a Samaritan again); faithfulness (17:20–18:8); humility (18:9–17); and the problem of wealth (18:18–30). After the third prediction of his coming death (18:31–34), Jesus heals a blind man and finds a lost man in Jericho (18:35–19:10). The final parable (19:11–27) is especially intended to prepare the disciples for his absence.

***The Events of the End (and New Beginning) in Jerusalem (19:45–24:53)***

□ **19:45–21:38** *Jesus Teaches in the Temple*

As anticipated in chapters 1 and 2, Jesus now returns to the temple. After driving out the money changers, he takes his rightful place as teacher in the temple, an event which is set in the context of the religious leaders plotting to kill him (19:47). Note how this whole section thus portrays the conflict between Jesus and the opposition in the context of the temple, while “the people” (v. 48) play the role of learners who are on God's side. Note also how the parable of the tenants in the vineyard (20:9–19) makes it clear that the vineyard (cf. Isa 5:1–7) is about to be given over to others (Gentiles).

□ **22:1–23:56** *The Trial and Death of Jesus*

Having shaped the narrative toward this point, Luke now recounts the events surrounding Jesus' death. Jesus is brought before three different tribunals (the Jewish Sanhedrin, Herod, and Pilate); note that before the political figures he is declared innocent of wrongdoing (23:4, 13–15). For the sake of his Gentile audience, who know that the Romans reserved crucifixion for slaves or noncitizen insurrectionists, Luke

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE

makes sure to note that Jesus himself “has done nothing to deserve death” (23:15). Even in his crucifixion, Jesus extends salvation to one of the “lost ones” (vv. 39–43)—who also affirms Jesus’ innocence.

### □ **24:1–53** *The Vindication and Exaltation of Jesus*

Luke has the longest resurrection narrative among the four Gospels. Recognized in the breaking of bread, Jesus himself repeatedly interprets his death in terms of its divine necessity and prophetic fulfillment: Christ *must* suffer and rise from the dead, “and repentance for the forgiveness of sins . . . be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (24:47), thus pointing to part 2 (Acts). Note that Luke concludes in the temple with rejoicing and waiting.

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Luke’s Gospel is one of the great treasures of the biblical story, emphasizing God’s fulfillment of his promises to Israel—that “the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:19) had come with Jesus’ compassionate ministry of deliverance for and acceptance of the poor and helpless.