



UNIT 3 NEW TESTAMENT

LESSON 3

LUKE

The longest of the Gospels, Luke has been said to be the most beautiful book ever written. It is full of tears, and songs and laughter; it is the hymn of the new people, the hosanna of the little ones and of the humble introduced into the Kingdom. A spirit of holy infancy, of joy, of fervour, the evangelistic sentiment in its first originality pervades it with an incomparable sweetness (Farrar).

Luke is the first volume of a longer work, which the author addresses to the same patron, Theophilus; another New Testament book, the Acts of the Apostles, is the additional volume. Acts will be studied, along with Luke, in this lesson even though it is out of sequence.

In the first four verses, Luke claims that his work is the product of the most careful research. Ramsay, himself a noted historian, stated that Luke should be placed along with the greatest of historians.

Luke is a writer of distinctive qualities of mind and style. Though he shares with the other New Testament writings the vernacular flavour of first-century Greek, his language is more literary than that of his sources. He repeatedly improves Mark's wording, and also avoids foreign words, whether Latin or Aramaic, used by his sources. The beauty of Luke's style survives translation.

Purpose

The immediate purpose of Luke's 'first volume' is stated in the preface (1:1-4): the writing of an historical account, based upon the best information available - both oral and written, so that Theophilus probably (a Roman official) could be assured of the 'solid truth' of the Christian faith.

It is evident that Luke intended his Gospel for more than one Gentile convert. It was written for the Gentile world at large. Jesus is more than the Messiah of the Jews is; He is the Saviour of the world, 'come to seek and save the lost' (19:10). That this Gospel is destined for Gentiles is clear:

- a) Luke omits all exclusively Jewish names, and puts in their place ones more widely used. For example, instead of rabbi and scribe, Luke writes teacher and lawyer. The Sea of Galilee is the Lake of Gennesaret.
- b) When giving dates, Luke uses the names of Roman Emperors. Names of Jewish officials are mentioned last (2:1; 3:1).
- c) In giving a formal list of ancestors of Jesus, Luke traces the genealogy back to Adam, regarded as the parent of the whole human race (cf. Luke 3:38 with Matthew 1:2 who traces the descent of Jesus to Abraham, the founder of the Jewish race).
- d) The Old Testament is seldom quoted.



- e) Luke calls attention to Gentiles (e.g. the Good Samaritan, the ten lepers, the sermon at Nazareth, the Great commission.) (For further evidence of Luke's 'Catholic Spirit' see 7:9; 9:50; 10:37; 12:13; 13:28ff; 17:16).

There is nothing in the Gospel that a Gentile could not understand.

With regard to Luke's complete work (Luke-Acts), his object clearly was to tell the story of the whole course of God's mighty acts in Christ, from the birth of the forerunner (John the Baptist) to the proclamation of the Gospel of Salvation in the capital city of the Gentile world.

Characteristics

- a) Luke's Interest in People

Jesus' estimate of the individual undoubtedly greatly impressed Luke, who was himself a man of deep sympathy. Many of the parables found only in Luke, centre attention on people, whereas Matthew's focus is upon the Kingdom. Luke's portraits are incomparable; Zecharias, Elizabeth, Mary, Martha and Mary, Zacchaeus and Cleopas. The poor and despised frequently appear. Jesus was laid in a manger; poor shepherds were his first visitors; his mother gave turtle doves, the offering of the poor, and Jesus describing his own work said "to the poor the Gospel is preached" (4:18; 7:22). Two exclusive parables emphasise the importance of the poor (14:16-24; 16:19-31). A despised publican appears in 18:9-14 and 19:2-10. A sinful woman figures in 7:37-50 and a penitent thief in 23:39-43. Chapter 15 emphasises God's concern for the lost. A special place is given to women. Luke mentions thirteen women, not mentioned elsewhere in the Gospels. An interest in children is shown by the references to the childhood of John and of Jesus. On three other occasions he specially mentions 'only children' (7:12; 8:42; 9:38).

- b) Prayer

There is more attention in this Gospel than in any other to Jesus at prayer (3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 29f 11:1; 22:32, 41; 23:34, 46). Three of the parables, recorded only by Luke, teach the need for persistence and humility in prayer (11:5-13; 18:1-8, 9-14).

- c) Joy

Expressing itself in prayer, praise and thanksgiving, joy is a keynote of this Gospel (2:20, 28, 38; 7:16; 13:13; 17:15; 24:52). Outstanding in this respect are the four great songs, only to be found in this Gospel: the Magnificat (1:46-55), the Benedictus (1:68-79), the Gloria in Excelsis (2:14), the Nunc Dimittis (2:29-32). Luke is the first Christian hymnologist and in his Gospel the phrase 'praising God' occurs more than in all the rest of the New Testament put together.

d) The Holy Spirit

Here, as in Acts, the importance of the Holy Spirit is stressed. He is the special possession of those most closely connected with Jesus' birth (1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25-27) and is often mentioned later (3:22; 4:1, 14, 18-21; 10:21; 11:13). The Gospel ends with the disciples waiting to 'be clothed with power from on high'.

e) Jesus as Redeemer

While Matthew emphasises Jesus as the Fulfiller of the Old Testament prophecies, Luke lays stress on Jesus as the Redeemer. His name would be called Jesus (= Saviour). In Mary's hymn of praise the redeeming work of God is praised, and in the angel's message 'a Saviour is born' ... (2:11). Simeon praises God because he has seen 'the salvation, which God prepared'. From Jesus' first public announcement concerning his ministry (4:18-19) to the end of that ministry Luke focuses attention upon Him who came to 'seek and save the lost' (19:10). (7)

Plan

Luke's intention to write 'an orderly account' has resulted in a work which is quite readily divided into four main sections:

- a) The Prologue - Infancy Narratives - Preparation for the Ministry 1:1-4:13
- b) Galilean Ministry 4:14-9:50
- c) From Galilee to Jerusalem 9:51-19:27
- d) The Jerusalem Ministry in the last days, the Passion, Resurrection and Ascension 19:28-24:53

We are reminded, however, that Luke's Gospel was not meant to be read as a separate work, in isolation from its sequel, and it is not possible to do justice to Luke's thought if it is detached from Acts. So, we will study Acts now.

ACTS

Together Luke's writings cover the period of our Lord's life and death, and the first thirty years of the Christian Church, including the years in which Paul's greatest missionary work was accomplished and the majority of his letters were written. The two parts of Luke's history really bind the New Testament together, his Gospel, dealing with the same events as the other Gospels, and his Acts providing the historical background to the Epistles of Paul.

About the same time as the four Gospels were gathered together to form one collection, another collection of Christian documents was also taking shape - the collection of the Pauline Epistles.



There would have been a gap between these two collections, were it not for Acts, which plays an indispensable part in relating the two collections to each other. Without Acts, a real picture of the apostolic age would be impossible.

Purpose

Luke's declared purpose for both Luke and Acts (see Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1f.) was to give a certain Theophilus an accurate and orderly account of the origins of Christianity about which Theophilus had some information already. For the latter part of his narrative, Luke could draw largely on his own experiences (see the 'we' sections 16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16) where Luke suddenly passes from a narrative in the third person to one in the first person plural. For the earlier part he could depend on reliable first-hand informants.

Luke's primary purpose was historical. His accuracy, as a historian, is acclaimed today by most commentators. F.F. Bruce cites an example, "One of the most remarkable tokens of his accuracy is his sure familiarity with the proper titles of all the notable persons who are mentioned in his pages. This was by no means such an easy feat in his day as it is in ours, when it is so simple to consult convenient books of reference."

Not only the purpose but also the content of the book are set forth in the preface to Acts (1:1-8). Luke meant to relate how the work which the Lord 'began to do and teach', as he had already told in his Gospel, took hold of the world. R.R. Williams suggests as the theme of Acts, "Nothing can stop the Gospel". It seems clear that Luke aims at relating how Christ was preached and was accepted in ever-widening circles, first in Jerusalem, then in Judaea, then in Samaria and at last in the whole world (1:8).

One of the secondary purposes Luke possibly had in mind when writing Acts, was an apologetic one - that is, to show that Christianity was the true successor to Judaism, that the opposition of the Jews was based on prejudice, that sensible and wise rulers had nothing to fear from Christianity.

Characteristics

a) A Gospel of the Spirit

Important for Luke is the recognition of a divine activity behind the events, hence his great emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit. The Church comes into being through the baptism of the Spirit (2:38). Fullness of the Spirit was the evidence of true Christianity (2:4; 6:3; 8:17; 10:44; 19:6). The Spirit directed the mission work of the Church (13:2; 16:7). The book has sometimes been called the 'Acts of the Holy Spirit'. Acts is the continuation of the story of Jesus Christ's ministry. Though his bodily presence is no longer with His disciples, there is little doubt of their awareness as to His risen and living presence with them.

b) Full of Grand Stories

Acts is full of superbly told stories containing a whole array of figures, which crowd its pages.

c) Focus on Peter and Paul

Little is said of the other apostles. Much is said of Peter and Paul. In chapters 1-12, the narrative moves from Jerusalem to Antioch, and in this section Peter occupies the limelight. The personality of Paul is strongly portrayed. He is introduced dramatically at Stephen's death (chapter 7). The narrative at the end of Acts (chapter 20 onwards) centres almost wholly on Paul and shows him moving on towards Rome, inevitably, but with courageous determination.

Plan

The period covered by Acts amounts to approximately 30 years - AD 30-60. Broadly speaking, the sweep of the missionary thrust is from Jerusalem to Rome and the book could be simply divided into two main sections:

1. How Peter and the first Christians brought the Gospel from Jerusalem to Antioch in Syria - chapters 1-12.
2. How Paul and his friends carried the Gospel from Antioch to Rome chapters 13-28.

The story could, of course, be divided and sub-divided 'ad infinitum'. The following is one suggested division:

1. Prologue 1:1-5
2. Initial Events 1:6-26
3. Birth of the Church in Jerusalem 2:1-5:42
4. Beginning of Persecution 6:1-9:31
5. Spread of Christianity to the Gentiles 9:32-12:25
6. First Missionary Journey 13:1-15:41
7. Second Missionary Journey 16:1-18:23
8. Third Missionary Journey 18:24-20:6
9. Journey to Jerusalem 20:7-21:17
10. Paul in Jerusalem 21:18-23:35
11. Paul before Felix, Festus and Agrippa at Caesarea 24:1-26:32
12. Journey to Rome 27:1-28:31

(Guthrie)



Question 1

What evidence is there that Luke intended his Gospel for Gentiles?

Question 2

What are some examples from his Gospel that show that Luke had a special interest in people?

Question 3

What is a redeemer? How does Luke show that Jesus is the Redeemer?

Question 4

Read Acts 1:1-8. Briefly summarise what is the purpose and the content of Acts as set forth in this preface.

Question 5

Why could "Acts" be called the "Acts of the Holy Spirit"?

QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY

What do the 3 parables in Luke 11:5-13, 18:1~8, 9-14 teach us about prayer? What is the most relevant point for you? Why?