



A
WALK
WITH
GOD







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AN EXPOSITION OF LUKE

R. C. SPROUL



LIGONIER MINISTRIES
RENEW YOUR MIND

CHRISTIAN FOCUS





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About the Author

Dr. R.C. Sproul is the founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries and can be heard teaching daily on the *Renewing Your Mind* radio broadcast on more than 300 radio outlets in the United States and throughout 60 countries. He received his Drs. from the Free University of Amsterdam and a Ph.D. from Whitefield Theological Seminary. Dr. Sproul has written more than 60 books, including *The Purpose of God – Ephesians* (ISBN 1-85792-609-9) and *The Gospel of God – Romans* (ISBN 1-85792-490-8) and has authored scores of magazine articles for evangelical publications as well as being editor of the *Reformation Study Bible*. He serves as Senior Minister of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Florida.







Luke Chapter One

I. Introduction (Luke 1:1-4)

I am sure that every Christian has one gospel that stands out as his or her favourite. If I were forced to choose, I would have to select Luke's. I have studied and taught it in various settings. It seems that the more I read it, the more excited I get about it.

Why was Luke written?

At the outset of Luke (1:1-4) there is what is called the 'prologue'. It is very short, but contains a great deal of important information. In it Luke gives his reason for writing: 'so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught' (1:4). It is not as if he says, 'I realize other gospels have been written, but you can't trust them, so let me set the record straight!' Rather, he is attempting to fill out some of the bare details in the other gospels, in order to give a more comprehensive record.

He knows that others have already written about Jesus (1:1), but he seeks to give an 'orderly account' (1:3) of Jesus' life. The New American Standard Version translates as 'consecutive order'; however, that could be a bit misleading as it doesn't necessarily mean chronological order. The gospel writers were not as concerned with the exact sequence of events as we might be today. What Luke means is that he



A WALK WITH GOD

has arranged his gospel in a systematic, logical and readable structure. He does that so we can make sense of the patterns of Jesus' teaching and the movement of his life.

Luke refers to his sources as 'those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word' (1:2). This reference to 'eyewitnesses' reveals Luke as a historian. He approached his task in a manner customary to ancient historians and so was concerned about eyewitness testimony. For example, with regard to discovering the details of the birth of Jesus, we can imagine him going about Palestine, finding people who were there when Jesus was born: perhaps tracking down a surviving shepherd and asking him to recall the events of that night in the field outside Bethlehem. Luke might have visited Mary and her family, questioning and probing to get the information that makes up the narrative. He had no interest in rumour or speculation; he wanted eye-witness testimony.



Who was Luke?



The New Testament doesn't give us a comprehensive picture or biography of Luke. However, we get hints from the New Testament and the traditions of the early church that Luke was the one identified by Paul as the beloved physician. His mastery of language and artistry with words reveal that he was an educated man. This was no rough-hewn fisherman, but a talented wordsmith whose mastery of Greek resulted in writings of great beauty. I think it is safe, therefore, to assume that the traditions at this point have their roots in accurate history. The author of this gospel was indeed Luke, the beloved physician and companion of Paul.

Other traditions inform us that he lived until he was 84, but he never married and so died childless. He was also said to be an artist. Whether he was a painter of first rank remains a speculative question, but that he was a word-artist is indisputable. His gospel has a literary flow of singular beauty that repeatedly impresses as we follow his narrative.



To whom did Luke write?

If we can answer that question it will give us insight as to why the book was written. Luke's is the only gospel that is directly addressed to a person, to someone named Theophilus (1:3). There is a great deal of discussion surrounding this name, since its meaning suggests it could be symbolic. It is made up of two parts: *theo*, which comes from the Greek, *theos*, meaning God. Then the word, *phileo*, one of the New Testament words for 'love'. Put those two words together, *theos* and *phileo*, and we discover that *Theophilus* means literally, 'one who is a lover of God'. Hence, some have argued that Luke is simply addressing his gospel to everyone who loves God. Everyone who loves God then becomes, in symbolic terms, *Theophilus*.

Interesting and plausible as that theory is, I would not choose it. I think Luke was addressing this book to a specific person. We see that Theophilus is not merely addressed as 'Theophilus', but as 'most excellent Theophilus'. This term 'most excellent' was a common title in the ancient world for nobility. It was an official title for prominent persons of high social standing. Since it was also an ancient custom for authors to dedicate their work to a financial patron, who enabled them to publish their writings, I think Luke was aided in the preparation of his gospel by a wealthy person named Theophilus. Appropriately he addresses both his gospel and the book of Acts to him.

Characteristics of his gospel

It is interesting that Theophilus is not a Jewish, but a Greek name. One of the most clearly discernible things about Luke's account is that it was written primarily for Gentiles. Just as Matthew, with all his Old Testament references, is writing with Jews in mind, so Luke's concern is to communicate the gospel to those outside the Jewish community. It is not surprising that Paul's fellow missionary to non-Jews should write a gospel directed at Gentile nations. He is showing that



A WALK WITH GOD

the gospel is not merely for the Jew, but for all people. This theme of universality is seen repeatedly in the gospel. At the outset, when Luke gives the genealogy of Jesus, he differs from Matthew. Matthew only traces the lineage of Jesus to Abraham, but Luke goes all the way back to Adam. Matthew shows Jesus as one who came to redeem the Jewish people. Luke declares that Jesus came not only for the Jews, but for all mankind. This motif is woven through his gospel as Jesus meets non-Jews: Greeks, Syrophoenicians and others.

Luke's use of the name Theophilus also emphasises the historical setting of God's activity. It was common for late nineteenth century scholars to be sceptical about the trustworthiness of Luke and Acts. Luke was criticised as an historian. His accuracy on details of first century culture was questioned. However, the critics and sceptics have been embarrassed, as Luke's credibility has been successively vindicated. It seems that whenever archaeologists uncover a new Palestinian artefact, Luke's historical accuracy is upheld. One scholarly non-Christian rabbi thought Luke was the finest historian in the ancient world.

Luke had a concern not only for history and universality, but also for individuals, particularly women. One professor has described Luke's gospel as the *Ladies' Home Journal* of the Bible. We see Jesus ministering to women, talking and spending time with them. They were an important part of his entourage. Luke also gives special attention to children and the poor. Jesus cares for the poor and disreputable, as the Anointed One who came to preach the gospel to them.

Finally, Luke establishes the centre stage for the person and work of the Holy Spirit. He has been called the 'theologian of the Holy Spirit'. He ministered during the outpouring of Pentecostal power and what came from it. Luke emphasises the Holy Spirit in Jesus' ministry more sharply than the other gospels. His book is historical; about real people, places and predicaments, but it is also supernatural. Luke reveals the





GABRIEL SENT TO ZECHARIAH

reality of the Spirit's power and presence as he is poured upon Jesus. He traces the Spirit of Christ in his public ministry: from his baptism to the cross; from his transfiguration to his resurrection; to the glorious portrait of Christ ascending into heaven.

2. Gabriel Sent to Zechariah (Luke 1:5-25)

We might have expected Luke to start his account of the life of Jesus with his birth or the beginning of his public ministry. Instead Luke begins his record earlier, with the events surrounding the birth of John the Baptist.

At the outset Luke calls our attention to something important when he says those things took place 'in the time of Herod king of Judea'. These words convey a sense of foreboding. Israel was oppressed almost as badly in the days of Herod as they were under Pharaoh. They were under the tyranny of the Romans who had appointed Herod as a puppet king. 'Herod the Great' was ruthless and powerful. Although he was famous for accomplishments in architecture and building, particularly his completion of the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, he also murdered members of his own family, and he was the one responsible for the slaughter of the children at the announcement of the birth of Jesus. So Herod's name is infamous and Luke reminds us that the events he narrates took place in this dreadful period of history.

This was not a time of revival or religious zeal. Herod was not one who would call his people back to godliness. He was only interested in building monuments to himself. For him the temple was not a holy place where men could come to worship, but an enormous project for which he could take credit.

Sometimes when we read the Old Testament it seems as if God is performing countless miracles. As we read that concise record of biblical history, we sometimes get confused and lose sight of what reality was at a particular time. Have you ever





A WALK WITH GOD

considered that at this moment in Israel's history Israel had not heard from God through a prophet for 400 years? God had spoken through Moses, Abraham, David and the prophets right up to Malachi. Then there was silence – 400 years of silence from God. We have to include this important fact in our understanding of the historical setting before we will grasp what is happening in the events described in the first chapter of Luke.

Some people remembered the promises God made to their ancestors. They still celebrated the Passover and the other annual festivals, as well as many religious traditions. But after 400 years of waiting, many others had become secular. Luke introduces Zechariah, a priest, and his wife Elizabeth who had not turned away: 'both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly' (1:6).

The name Zechariah means, 'The Lord remembers'. The people had forgotten God's promises but there was a remnant who held firm. A priest, who had no prominent role in public life, lived up to his name and still believed in God. He was committed to the ancient promises and was married to a humble woman who believed them too.

Elizabeth's name means, 'My God is an oath'. Elizabeth herself had been born into a priestly family where, by God's providence, she was prepared for marriage to this godly man. I am sure that they had to encourage one another in times when people had forgotten God.

Here were two servants of God who believed the promises despite suffering one of the greatest disappointments that could befall a Jewish family: they had no children. No doubt they had prayed often about it, but by now they had probably forgotten those prayers, because of their age.

Then Luke records how a day of days came for Zechariah. Priests generally performed their duties in villages and towns. The greatest honour a priest could have was to serve in the temple. However, priests numbered in the thousands and to





GABRIEL SENT TO ZECHARIAH

ensure the tasks were distributed fairly they were assigned by lot. Even then a priest would only serve in the temple once in his lifetime, and this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity fell on Zechariah in his old age (1:8-9).

Zechariah would have gone to the temple with both a joyful anticipation and a sense of fearfulness. He was going to enter the Holy Place to offer up prayers for the nation at the altar of incense. People gathered outside to see the priest when he came out after offering the prayers for the people, because they wanted to know if there was any sign that God had heard his pleas. As Zechariah's mind was fixed on the altar, 'an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense' (1:11).

Naturally Zechariah was terrified, but the angel's first words were, 'Do not be afraid ... your prayer has been heard' (1:13). The exact prayer is not mentioned, but it is unlikely that it was his prayer for a child. Rather, the prayer that has been answered is Zechariah's prayer at the altar for the redemption of Israel, for the Messiah. And because of that his wife will bear a special child who will fulfil a special task for the Lord, that of leading the return of the children of Israel to the faith of their fathers.

Zechariah would not have missed the fact that the angel was quoting from the book of Malachi, repeating the words of the last promise God made to Israel: 'See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse' (Mal. 4:5-6).

The angel's announcement links the last promise of the Old Testament with the first promise of the New. Zechariah was given the message that he and his wife would be parents of the prophet who would announce the Messiah!

Zechariah had retained confidence in God's promises in an age of unbelief, but this promise is more than he can bear.





A WALK WITH GOD

Some categorise the biblical stories about angels as primitive superstition and mythology, despite the fact that angels are frequently mentioned in the Bible. Angels fulfil two main functions. First, they are messengers from God who announce important events. Second, they minister to God's people during great trials. It is no surprise then that at this time angels are much in evidence, announcing the birth of John and Jesus. This angel made an announcement to Zechariah that would change the course of history.

He stumbles at it: 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years?' (1:18).

The angel replies simply, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God.' Do you see the contrast? Zechariah shows his disbelief when he says, 'I am an old man!' But the angel reminds Zechariah that he is speaking with the authority of God himself. He has come from God with his authority to make this announcement.

'Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.' They expected the priest's prayers to last a certain length of time, but too much time had passed and they were becoming apprehensive.

Eventually Zechariah came out, but he could not speak to them. They realised that he had seen a vision in the temple. The order of Luke's words is unusual for he says the people realised Zechariah had seen a vision before he made signs to them. The words seem to suggest that the people realised immediately. As soon as they saw his face they knew he had seen a vision. Perhaps as Zechariah walked out of the temple, he reflected the light of Gabriel's countenance, and the people knew he had been in the presence of a heavenly messenger.

After the days of his ministry in the temple were completed, he went home. No doubt he was eager to tell Elizabeth with signs and gestures of his extraordinary experience.

And Elizabeth became pregnant.

