

MAJOR THEMES IN LUKE'S GOSPEL

Heaven meets earth for real. As you begin journeying through the Gospel of Luke, pay close attention to the emphasis on both that which is heavenly (The Holy Spirit, angelic beings, angelic visitations, awe and wonder) and also historical facts (Herod King of Judea, Caesar Augustus, a Roman census, Quirinius, etc.). Luke is writing "so that we may know the certainty of these things" (1:3). As commentator N.T. Wright explains:

'SPACE ALIENS TOOK MY BABY', screams the headline. Or perhaps 'GRANDMOTHER SWIMS ATLANTIC'. And what do people say? 'It must be true; it was in the newspapers.' 'I saw it on television.' 'The person who told me was told by someone who was there at the time.' We have learnt to laugh at all of these. News is 'packaged' to tell us what we want to hear. Television cameras often deceive. And stories which come from 'a friend of a friend' might as well be fiction. How do we know what to believe?

Luke opens his gospel with a long, formal sentence, like a huge stone entrance welcoming you impressively to a large building. Here, he is saying, is something solid, something you can trust. Writers in the first-century Mediterranean world quite often wrote opening sentences like this; readers would know they were beginning a serious, well-researched piece of work. This wasn't a fly-by-night or casual account. It would hold its head up in the world at large.¹

Luke's Gospel is an orderly account essentially saying, "fact check me." The Gospel of Luke is unique from the other Gospels in that it presents an orderly, well investigated account of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1:3-4). In addition, also notice Luke's emphasis on *fulfillment* (1:1). The birth and arrival of Jesus the Messiah was not a new plan but was God's plan all along.

The Ministry and Work of the Holy Spirit. Luke's gospel reveals many ways that the Holy Spirit was at work. For example, the Spirit's work is clearly described in the miraculous births of John (1:15) and Jesus (1:35), and in the praises of God's people in response to those arrivals (e.g. 1:41; 2 v 25-27). The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus at his baptism and empowers him for ministry (4:14, 18). The Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan (4:1), and Jesus himself rejoices in the Holy Spirit (10:21). Later, Jesus promises his disciples the presence of the Spirit in their times of need (e.g. 12:12; 24:49). Jesus' promises regarding the Holy Spirit are clearly fulfilled and witnessed in Luke's second volume, Acts.

¹ Wright, T. (2004). [Luke for Everyone](#) (p. 1). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Prayer and “Prayer-ables” (prayer parables). Luke has 59% more prayer language than Matthew and contains three additional distinctive parables relating to prayer. In Luke 3:21, 6:12, 9:18 and 9:28, Luke takes the same accounts of Mark and, instead of abbreviating the story, he adds a reference to Jesus’ praying that was not present in Mark. Of all the gospels, Luke is the one that deals with prayer the most, making it a major theme in his writings.²

Luke is quick to highlight Jesus’ practice of prayer, especially before important moments.

- Jesus gives thanks to God at the beginning of meals in an act of breaking bread (9:16,22,22:17,19, 24:30)
- Jesus used to withdraw from the exigencies of his ministry for *prolonged periods* of prayer. (5:16, 4:42, 9:18, 6:12, 9:28, 22:39)
- We learn the sheer intensity of prayer of which our Lord was capable of in the account of his prayer on the mount of olives (Luke 22:39-46)
- Jesus’ very last act in death was giving of himself in prayer into the hands of his Fathers (23:46)
- Luke offers no occasion where Jesus prays with, and for, the sick or the demonized

Luke also records three memorable parables on the topic of prayer: the parable about the friend who arrives in the middle of the night (11:5-8), the parable of the persistent woman and the judge (18:1-8), and the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector at prayer in the temple (18:9-14). Luke also shows Jesus repeatedly encouraging his followers to pray (e.g. 6:28) and showing them how to do it (11:2-4).

Spontaneous Songs of Joy and Rejoicing. The first two chapters of Luke read a bit like a Broadway play; people repeatedly break into songs of praise! In just chapters 1 and 2 (Luke 1:46-55, 1:67-79, 2:29-32). the work of God is greeted with spontaneous words of praise by Mary, Zechariah, the angels, Simeon, and Anna; it is a pattern that continues through the book (e.g. 17:15). These songs are full of Biblical themes and Old Testament images and motifs. Luke uses the verb “rejoice” more often than any other author of Scripture.

Seeking and Saving. Luke’s account shows that the life and death and resurrection of Jesus are all a part of the rescue plan of God foretold in the Old Testament and is now unfolding for the salvation of his people (e.g. 4:21; 22:37; 24:44). Luke 15 outlines three parables (lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son) which give a vivid picture of the heart and mission of God. Luke uses the word “salvation” and “save” more than any of the other Gospel writers. As you read, look for what the salvation that Jesus brought really

² Teach us to Pray: D.A. Carson

means (and what it does not mean). Many commentators and Bible teachers identify Luke 19:10 as the theme verse for all of Luke's Gospel, "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*"

Journey Motif. Luke develops his themes using a journey motif – Jesus making His way through Galilee (Ch. 4:14-9:40). . . toward Jerusalem (9:51-19:27) . . . and finally in Jerusalem to fulfill His destiny as Savior of the world. Unlike the other Gospels, In Luke, Jesus heads toward Jerusalem in Luke 9:51, but doesn't arrive for ten chapters (Luke 19:28)! Jesus does not head straight for Jerusalem, but instead moves around from place to place. Yet Luke repeatedly reminds the reader that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-56, 13:22, 13:33, 17:11, 18:31, 19:11, 19:28, 19:41). In short, though not a straight-line trip, the journey motif represents a theological theme, stressing Jesus' resolve to reach his Jerusalem goal.³

A Kingdom for the Outcasts. A repeated theme in the Gospel of Luke is that "nobody's" get exalted to places of honor. Luke seems particularly concerned that his readers should see that the good news about Jesus is not limited to the people that were valued and honored in the society of that day. Luke highlights the dignity and value of people who would not have been valued in that society:

- Women: Luke's portrait of the role of women in the ministry of Jesus is extraordinary. They are faithful and tenacious friends to Jesus when many of the male disciples abandon him (23:27); they are the special objects of Jesus' mercy and compassion (e.g. 7:11-15); they are avid learners (10:39), financial supporters (8:3), and models of true sacrificial giving (21:1-4).
- Children: In ancient times, children were not given the prominent place in society that they occupy today. But Luke highlights Jesus' concern for children who were gravely ill (8:41-42), oppressed by demons (9:42) or even—in the case of the young man from Nain—dead (7:11-15). Each one of these children is said to be an only child, and Jesus' mercy toward both the children and their parents is palpable in each of Luke's suspense-filled accounts of their healing.
- Sinners: Some of the most vibrant and memorable characters in Luke's Gospel were some of the most disreputable. Zacchaeus was a notorious crook (19:7), and Luke delicately describes the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with her tears as a woman "who lived a sinful life" (7:37). Each, however, is welcomed by Jesus and praised for their extraordinary love and repentance. Some of Jesus' parables in Luke come to a shocking conclusion, as the sinner (the tax collector, the wastrel son) turns out to be the hero while the upright person (the Pharisee, the older brother who stayed home) winds up left out of God's grace.

³ Mark L. Strauss, "Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels.

- **Foreigners:** While the book of Acts shows the unfolding of God's desire to give his salvation to all the nations, we see glimpses of that plan in Luke's Gospel. The angel declares that the birth of Jesus is good news for the entire earth (2:14), and Simeon says that Jesus will be a light of revelation to the Gentiles (2:32). Jesus speaks well of Gentiles (4:25-27) and heals the servant of a Roman centurion (7:1-10), marveling that he had not found faith like this among the people of Israel.⁴

Chapter 10-20 contain many of Jesus most famous parables such as the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Great Banquet, the Prodigal Son, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Persistent Widow, and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. They also contain many memorable stories, including the meal at the home of Mary and Martha, the healing of ten men with leprosy, and the story of Zacchaeus. This section has sometimes been called "the Gospel for the Outcast," since so many of the stories and parables relate to God's love for the lost and the outsider.

Son of Man. Just as Matthew portrays Jesus as the King, and as Mark reveals Him as the Servant, so Luke offers a unique perspective of Jesus as the Son of Man. This phrase, "Son of Man," was Jesus's favorite way to refer to Himself (used 24 times in Luke). Luke presents Jesus as the promised "Son of Man" who has come to save mankind. Jesus is the ideal man, God incarnate walking among His people, demonstrating His love and compassion through His deeds and discourses, words and wonders, parables and miracles. Luke shows how Jesus met the needs of men, how he touched their hearts and healed their souls. Jesus seeks the lost; then he saves the lost (19:10).

Danger or Riches Of the four Gospel writers Luke has the most to say about wealth, poverty and the danger of riches (6:20-26; 8:14; 12:13-21; 16:10-13, 19-31). For example, in Luke's version of the Beatitudes, Jesus not only pronounces a blessing on the poor (Luke 4:20b), he also pronounces curses on the rich. "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry" (Luke 4:24-25a).

However, it is a profound mistake to see Luke as an evangelist against the rich. He is, more accurately, as Kevin DeYoung states, an "evangelist to the rich."⁵ Luke and Acts are both addressed to Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). In his Gospel, Luke gives Theophilus the title "most excellent," the same honorific given to the Roman magistrates Felix (Acts 23:26) and Festus (Acts 26:25). Most scholars figure that

⁴ McKinley, M. (2016). *Luke 1-12 for You*. (C. Laferton, Ed.) (pp. 12-13). The Good Book Company.

⁵ DeYoung, Kevin *Luke: Evangelist to the Rich*. TGC Blog.

Theophilus was some kind of Roman official, or at least a person of some social standing who was recently converted and in need of firm grounding in the faith. Luke was most likely relatively wealthy himself. He was known as “the beloved physician” (Col. 4:14), not a meager profession now or then. Moreover, Luke shows evidence in his writing of being well-educated, well-traveled, and well-connected.

Luke was not a poor man writing to poor people that together they might denounce the rich. It’s much closer to the truth to say Luke was a rich man writing to another rich man (and people like him) in order to show how the rich could truly follow Jesus. Therefore, it is not surprising that Luke focuses on how followers of Jesus should prayerfully practice good stewardship with their possessions (6:12; 9:28-29; 11:1-4; 12:33-34; 18:1; 22:40).

THE UNIQUENESS OF LUKE

Luke’s Gospel stands out as unique among the Gospels in various ways.

- Luke is the longest of the Gospels, starting earlier in Jesus’ life than the others (with the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist), and ending later (with Jesus’ ascension to heaven)
- Luke is the only Gospel that reveals anything about Jesus’ childhood, describing his family’s visit to Jerusalem when he was 12 years old (Luke 2:41-52, Luke 2:41-52)
- Luke is the only Gospel writer to provide a sequel, the Book of Acts. Luke continues his story beyond the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to the birth and growth of the early church. Altogether, the Gospel of Luke and Acts comprises 27% of the New Testament, meaning that Luke contributed more words to the New Testament than Paul (25%), or John (20%)
- Luke writes as a historian and theologian. Luke and Acts contain some of the finest literary Greek in the New Testament. The Prologue to the Gospel ([Luke 1:1-4](#)) is a good example of this. Written in a formal literary style common to Hellenistic authors of Luke’s day, the Prologue sets forth Luke’s purpose. Having carefully investigated the eyewitness accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, Luke is writing an “orderly” (well organized) account so that his readers “may know the certainty” of the things they have been taught. The prologue shows that Luke’s purpose is both historical and theological. He is writing as a meticulous historian, investigating and carefully recording the facts in order to confirm the truth of the Christian message. This message especially concerns the continuity between God’s promises given to Israel and their fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah and in the Church.⁶

⁶ <https://bibleproject.com/blog/luke-gospels-savior-lost-people/>

- In Luke's 1,151 verses, 568 of them are simply the words of Jesus.
- An event unique to Luke is Jesus' ascension to heaven. Luke recounts it briefly at the end of his Gospel ([Luke 24:50-51](#)). The ascension is crucial for Luke's narrative for two key reasons. First, together with the resurrection, it serves as vindication that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. In his preaching on the Day of Pentecost, Peter points out that although wicked people put Jesus to death, God raised him from the dead and exalted him to his right hand as Lord and Messiah. Jesus' ascension is proof of his vindication ([Acts 2:22-36](#)). Second, it is from this position as reigning Lord and Messiah that Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit ([Acts 2:33](#)). The Spirit's coming serves as confirmation that the end times have begun ([Acts 2:16-21](#), citing [Joel 2:28-32](#)) and becomes the empowering and guiding force for the apostles throughout Acts, as they take the Gospel to the ends of the earth.