

Gospel of Luke
Week 1 Summary
Luke 1:1–2:52

Luke stands apart from the other gospel writers in that he does not write for a community of faith. Rather, he writes his gospel to a man named Theophilus, who is an important man based on the designation “most excellent”. This would indicate that Luke is also writing beyond just Theophilus, he is also seeking to influence those of Theophilus’ circle of friends and family. We don’t know how far along Theophilus is in his faith, but we do know that Luke is interested in bringing Theophilus deeper into conviction about Jesus Christ. This means Luke’s gospel is a piece of persuasive writing. Luke has given an orderly account in order to draw out the historical events of the gospel of Jesus, but more importantly their significance. All this so that the readers and hearers might put their faith in Jesus.

Luke shifts from his purpose statement right into his narrative switching from a Greco-Roman world to the Second Temple Jewish world. He tells of a righteous couple who puzzlingly are barren and old. This is a deeply shameful condition in their place and time. Then as Zechariah has the honour of making sacrifice on the altar in the sanctuary on behalf of the people and the people are outside praying — an angel of the Lord appears. Both the barrenness and the angel bring up the Old Testament narratives which shows that the events being narrated are consistent with God’s existing story as well raises expectations for God’s intervening once again into human history on behalf of his people Israel. This is precisely what the people on the outside of the temple would be praying for. Indeed, the message of the angel confirms this long hope: the people will see their redemption through the son which is to be born to the couple. Just as the couple’s shame will be removed, so will Israel’s.

Unfortunately, Zechariah’s response is not overwhelming, but rather seeks some proof that what the angel has promised could happen. The angel asserts who he is and that he speaks the very words of God, but a sign is also given — silence until what he says is fulfilled. The fulfilment comes almost right away when Zechariah returns home and his wife become pregnant.

Then Luke brings a second birth announcement in parallel to the first. Now a girl of marrying age, 12-13 years old, who is only betrothed but not yet married is approached by the same angel Gabriel. Though she has no status — because Luke has given us so little description — she is called favoured one. Mary has no need of a child at this point unlike Elizabeth which points once again that Luke has in mind Israel’s story not just these strands he’s narrating. The angel promises a son who will be called Son of the Most High a title to indicate his uniqueness as God’s son. This will be the promised Messiah who will sit on David’s throne eternally. Mary’s question is different than Zechariah’s: not how will I know, but how can this be because she has not lain with her betrothed or any other. The answer is God’s very power and presence will come on her — the same language of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost and the disciples. In addition to the promise a sign is given Mary’s cousin Elizabeth is pregnant. Mary’s response is exemplary — she submits to God’s will even at personal cost.

John has been described as being filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born and we find out why. It is because his roll of prophet begins before he is born. When Mary greets her elder, the baby in Elizabeth leaps for joy and Elizabeth in the Spirit discerns it is because Mary carries one who Elizabeth now calls Lord. Mary’s song is a place of reflection and summarization. What God has done for Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary are wonderful things for them, but more importantly they are the very fulfilment of God’s promises. Israel no longer needs to wait. God is on the move like he has moved in the past. John’s birth prompts Zechariah to praise God along much of the same lines.

Once again, Luke shifts the scene. He places the birth of this new ruler Jesus against the backdrop of Rome itself. We have Caesar Augustus and Quirinius who was governor. They had the power to call all the world to a census — to register. Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem and have the baby there. The baby is wrapped and placed in a manger. Rather than the powerful like Caesar knowing, it is shepherds who are informed. They, like Mary, show that God's reversal of fortune is already happening — the powerful are brought low and the low are raised up. They witness the holy family and they too praise God and begin telling what they have seen and heard.

The significance of the child is undergirded by the events in the temple: not only is Jesus made holy by being consecrated to God, but prophets speak over him. And, we see that where John was to have an impact in Israel, Jesus will have a more universal significance — he is a light to the Gentiles.

Finally Luke tells of this temple scene at age 12. The parents are upset that Jesus has not come home with them but has stayed in the temple. Jesus' reply is that he was in his father's house, doing his father's work. In short, as was prophesied over him: he is Messiah, he is holy, and he is Son of God. He understands who he is and he is now aligning himself, his allegiance, and his work in line with God's purpose. He becomes the actor of his story now; he goes home and they go with him.

Notes

God is the main actor in this whole account of Luke-Acts. This is his story and he is the hero. This is about Israel on one level, but Israel as a nation is for the purpose of blessing the nations. So, when Israel is restored it has all humanity as a beneficiary. Prayer is our appropriate posture and when we pray God hears, speaks, and acts. Luke leaves lots of opportunities for us the readers and hearers to ask ourselves — do we believe? how will we respond? Like Zechariah or like Mary? Will we rejoice for the dawning of salvation?

The King Jesus Gospel

“Introduction” and “Chapter 1”

1. McKnight tells his story about Evangelism Explosion and the way it alerted him to some of the problems of modern day gospel and evangelism. What have your own experiences been around sharing the gospel? And, how have they shaped you and the questions you ask?
2. Why is discipleship rather than decision important?
3. The Big Question: what is the gospel? What is your own current understanding of that word?
4. How do you feel about the idea that we might not understand what the gospel is and that our ignorance may be actually eroding the church?