

THE GOOD NEWS
ACCORDING TO

Luke

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The Good News According to Luke

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Scripture taken from THE ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION. ©2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

INTRODUCTION

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

- Luke 1:1-4

Everyone has to answer the big “meaning of life” questions: Who are we, and why are we here? What’s wrong with the world? What, if anything, can make it right? Who gets to define morality? Should I be moral? Why? Why should I be a good person? Why should anyone choose love instead of hate? How should I use and spend the short days I get to live on this planet?

Everyone has functional answers to these questions. And no matter what our answers are, they cannot be overtly proven or disproven. We all must thoughtfully investigate and draw our own conclusions.

Yet, we all tend to agree that better and worse answers to these questions exist. Most modern, secular Americans agree that it is better to work things out with your enemies as opposed to killing them. We tend to believe that it is good and right to care for the poor. Almost unanimously, we assume that all human beings have rights that should be fought for and protected.

But all of these beliefs come from somewhere.

Without even realizing it, many of our deepest held values come from the Christian movement started by Jesus.

Luc Ferry, French philosopher in his book *A Brief History of Thought* says, “The philosophy of human rights to which we subscribe today would never have established itself [apart from Christianity].” In other words, if Christianity never became the dominant western worldview, our thoughts on human rights would not exist as we know them.

In pre-Christian Europe, when the monks were propagating Christianity, all of the elites thought that loving your enemies and taking care of the poor was crazy. They said society would fall apart, because that’s not the way the world works. The talented and strong prevail. The winner takes all. The strong prey on the weak. The poor are born to suffer. Isn’t that how it has always worked? But the teaching of Christianity revolutionized pagan Europe by stressing the dignity of the person, the primacy of love, including toward enemies, and the care of the poor and orphans.

- Tim Keller, *Encounters with Jesus*

We all believe in human rights – in liberty and freedom – but we often don’t ask ourselves “Why?” The basic premise is contrary to the rule of the natural world where the strong eat the weak. So if it’s natural for the strong to eat the weak... and if we all got here through the natural, unguided process of evolution... why do we think it is wrong for a strong nation to eat a weaker nation? On what basis can we say that genocide – a strong ethnic group “eating” a weaker one – is wrong? If there is no God, then our views of justice are nothing more than opinions. And we suddenly have no basis to denounce injustice.

Unless there is a God, we have no right to tell anyone that our feelings or ideas are more valid than their feelings and ideas.

Unless there is a God who created us in His personal image, then many of the values we cherish and assume are actually imaginary – wishful thinking with no foundation.

Yet we are sure that these values are not imaginary, that things like genocide are absolutely wrong and that people have rights regardless of their

talent, gender, age, wealth or race. Late Yale law professor, Arthur Leff captured this self-defeating tension in our thoughts perfectly:

In the absence of God... each ethical and legal system... will be differentiated by the answer it chooses to one key question: who among us... ought to be able to declare 'law' that ought to be obeyed?... Either God exists or He does not, but if He does not, nothing and no one else can take His place... As things are now, everything is up for grabs. Nevertheless: napping babies is bad. Starving the poor is wicked. Buying and selling each other is depraved. There is such a thing as evil... God help us.

- Arthur Leff, "Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law"

Because we assume human rights are real and morality has a foundation, we owe it to ourselves to examine where these ideas came from. We owe it to ourselves to examine the school of thought where these beliefs originated – Christianity and its founder Jesus Christ.

The gospel of Luke is a perfect opportunity to examine Jesus and the origins of His movement. In his opening lines, Luke declares his intention for compiling this biographical narrative about Jesus. He writes so that an educated and esteemed man, Theophilus (and all others privileged to read thereafter) would have "certainty" that Jesus not only spoke the true answers to life's big questions, but that He was the answer.

Jesus doesn't just *have* the answers.

He *is* the answer to life's biggest questions.

In carefully looking at and considering Jesus, Luke says we can be certain we have found the truth. There is something about Jesus that sets Him apart from any other spiritual teacher, political leader, or revolutionary. There is something about Him that is different, significant and even otherworldly. His impact is so far reaching that many modern, secular minded Americans don't even realize how many of the values we take for granted come from His teaching and His actions.

Part of this certainty comes from what theologians describe as Jesus' "self-authenticating" glory.

Jesus, as He is revealed in the bible, has a glory – an excellence, a spiritual beauty – that can be seen as self-evidently true. It is like seeing the sun and knowing that it is light and not dark, or like tasting honey and knowing that it is sweet and not sour. There is no long chain of reasoning from premises to conclusions. There is a direct apprehension that this person is true and His glory is the glory of God.

- John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ*

Our culture is growingly uncertain when it comes to the truth about Jesus. One of the biggest obstacles that people deal with is that they often think they already know all about Him. They often think they already know the answers that Jesus offers to the questions of life, and they have already deemed Jesus' answers as unsatisfying, unworthy or wrong. Unfortunately it is quite common for these people to have a distorted or altogether false view of Jesus.

So we invite you to take an investigative look at the real Jesus. And join us as we study *The Good News According to Luke*.¹

1 The line of reasoning in this intro is adapted from two of Tim Keller's books: *Encounters with Jesus* and *The Reason for God*.

LUKE'S BIOGRAPHY

A physician by profession, Luke plays both the role of investigator and reporter as he searches out eyewitness reports and reconstructs “an orderly account” of the truth of Jesus’ life, teaching and ministry.

Written about 30 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Luke carries out his investigation in a very precise historical window. Many of the eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life and ministry are still alive but they won’t be for much longer. So Luke takes his opportunity to interview the eyewitnesses who are still alive and compiles both the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. Put together, Luke contributes more words, sentences and verses to the New Testament than any other author (although Paul wrote more books.) Luke takes his time and uses lots of words, including many specific details and very helpful stories and illustrations.

Luke was a close friend of Paul, accompanying him on many of his travels. He was also an understudy and personal physician to Paul.

LUKE'S BACKGROUND

Luke himself was not a not an eyewitness of Jesus’ ministry but rather came to faith in Jesus as the early church preached the gospel of Jesus’ defeat of sin through His death and resurrection. He was also a Gentile from Antioch – not Jewish ethnically or religiously. He didn’t grow up in the temple and he wasn’t acquainted with the Old Testament scriptures or looking forward to a coming Messiah. Like many of you, Luke became a follower of Jesus as an adult and had lots of questions. This is very helpful because his inquisitive and skeptical mind seeks to answer many

of those questions in his study and writing.

Along with coming to faith as an adult with a secular background, Luke is an extremely educated and intelligent man. As a doctor, he studied medicine and science. As a writer, his historical accuracy is sharp and his Greek is perfect. In a culture where less than one out of ten men were educated, Luke is highly educated and he uses all of his vast intellect to love Jesus, study Jesus and serve Jesus by writing books about Jesus.

For those of you who are highly educated, skeptical and/or love science and medicine, Luke is a reminder that intellect is not an enemy of Jesus. Your mind, your questions and your education are all gifts given to you by God and they are intended to be used for Jesus as tools of mission to help others know and love Jesus.

THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

In order to best understand Luke (and the Bible in general), we have to understand some of the cultural climate and factors of Luke's world. His original audience would have read his words in context of these major cultural currents:

FAMILY MATTERS

The Jewish people were a highly collectivist society. Unlike modern day America, their natural understanding was that the good of the group outweighed the good of the individual. They were very, very nationalistic and family oriented. Your family was where you received your identity. Your family determined where you lived. Your family determined what your occupation would be. And they even usually determined who you would marry. Nothing was more important than family loyalty. Jesus' description of a new, more important spiritual family in Luke 8:19-21 and 14:25-27 was shocking. (About the equivalent of telling an American that the best way to be happy is to give up your independence and let someone else make all your decisions for you.)

ROMAN OCCUPATION

The Israelites are at this time occupied and ruled by the Roman Empire. This means they are simultaneously not autonomous or self-governing because Rome has ultimate political jurisdiction, and also in some ways, they are left alone to do as they please. This is why the Jewish leaders of the Sanhedrin condemn Jesus to die according to their law, but still have to ask permission from Pilate (Luke 22:66-23:5). To fund their massive

army, the Roman Empire levied heavy taxes on occupied nations including Israel.

AWAITING A MESSIAH

God's people had been given promises throughout their history that someone was coming to make right what was wrong in the world (Isaiah 9:2-7, Zechariah 9:9-10). Their general understanding was that this Messiah would be a political king who would lead them to national prominence and power. Specifically, they were looking for someone who would overthrow Roman occupation. They also anticipated that he would be preceded by a voice who would come in the spirit of Elijah (Malachi 4:5-6). The events surrounding the birth of John the Baptist and his ministry filled many people with excitement that the Messiah – their hope of dignity, prosperity and freedom – was on his way.

THE HERODIAN INFLUENCE

King Herod was a particularly terrible and corrupt King over Israel who represented Roman occupying power and oppression. Those who supported Herod were called Herodians. They were the cultural progressives of their time bringing unwanted change and significant moral shifts. They had a Greek perspective on sex, the body and truth. None of these things were welcomed by the Jewish ruling class. This could be roughly compared to the distaste conservatives had for MTV in the early 1990s.

RESPONSES TO OCCUPATION

There were four primary responses to Roman occupation:

1. *Fight em'!* Some Israelites believed they needed to stand up to the Romans like David stood up to Goliath. These were the zealots led by a group of assassins called the Sicarii. The most notable zealot in Luke is Peter, one of Jesus' converted disciples, who still wants to fight at times (Luke 22:49-51).
2. *If you can't beat em', join em'!* The Sadducees and other wealthy and prominent officials accepted much of the culture around them in a pragmatic play for power and prominence.
3. *Run away!* Other groups including the Essenes and the Dead Sea groups removed themselves from society to go preserve

their cultural purity and hang out with God in the woods.

4. *Bunker down!* Responding to the Sadducees acceptance of culture and the perceived negative influence of the Herodians, many groups remained in Jerusalem but emphasized strict morality and piety. Most notably, this response is displayed consistently throughout Luke by the Pharisees.

CHARACTERS IN LUKE

Here's your Cliffs Notes reference guide to the major players in Luke's biography of Jesus:

HEROD

Son of King Herod I (who led to the height of Greek influence in Israel) which can be a bit confusing since they have the same name. Herod Jr. is a corrupt and powerful King ruling over Israel. He is sexually immoral. He abuses his power. Eventually has John the Baptist killed and mocks and beats Jesus before His crucifixion (Luke 3:19-20, 9:7-9, and 23:11-12).

PHARISEES

Extremely educated sect of the Jewish ruling class. Stringent rabbis who believed God had removed Himself from acting on behalf of Israel because of their immorality. Attempted to use their piety and devotion to regain God's favor for the nation. Pharisees set much of the spiritual tone for Israel in this time, so Jesus consistently confronts their misunderstandings of God and the big questions of life.

SAMARITANS

Samaritans split from mainstream Judaism in the time of the Babylonian exile. They claimed a purer form of Judaism from before the exile and also a different central place for worshiping God (Gerizim instead of Jerusalem – John 4:19). Israelites saw the Samaritans as half-breeds and they were the object of bigotry, racism, bullying and scorn.

TAX COLLECTORS

Employees of the Roman Empire. Many were native Israelites who had betrayed family and country and chosen to support the enemy. Then on top of this treachery, they frequently stole by taking more taxes than the astronomical amount the people already owed.

SINNERS

A class of people that included those with physical deformities and lifelong sicknesses (i.e. leprosy) as well as those whose occupation or lifestyle was by nature sinful (i.e. prostitutes).

PILATE

The fifth prefect of Judea. He was a Roman official who oversaw the trial of Jesus and finally gave the order to crucify Him (under heavy pressure from Jewish officials).

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Predecessor and cousin of Jesus. He calls the people of God to repent and prepare their hearts for the coming Messiah. Eventually put to death by Herod.

ANGELS

God's warrior messengers of light. Live in spiritual realm and reveal themselves at times throughout Luke to deliver specific messages from God. Fearfully awesome.

DEMONS

Fallen angels who play for team Satan. Promote darkness, brokenness and pain wherever they go.

THE DEVIL

The first fallen angel. Blinded by pride, the devil desired God's throne and was cast out of heaven as a result of his treason. He has been leading humans away from God and toward sinful rebellion from the beginning of creation (Genesis 3:1-7 and Luke 4:2-13).

THE HOLY SPIRIT

God the Spirit. Empowers people with God's strength for God's purpose and ministry in the world. Rests on Jesus at His baptism and empowers all of His ministry (Luke 4:1 and 14).

IMPORTANT PLACES

The following areas are important places in Jesus' life and ministry:

NAZARETH

Jesus' hometown where He is raised by Joseph and Mary. He grows in wisdom and stature here while learning Joseph's craft of carpentry.

CAPERNAUM

Small fishing village on the Sea of Galilee near the hometown of many disciples – Peter, Andrew, James, John and Mathew (the tax-collector). Jesus did significant ministry in this area including teaching in the synagogue and multiple miracles (Luke 4:31-36 and 7:1-9).

JERUSALEM

Biggest city in the region. Political, cultural and religious epicenter. This is where Jesus' ministry goes public and where He is heralded as king on Palm Sunday. This is also where he is put on trial and crucified within the same week.

GALILEE

Northern region of Israel. Contains Jesus' hometown Nazareth. This is where the vast majority of Jesus' life and ministry takes place.

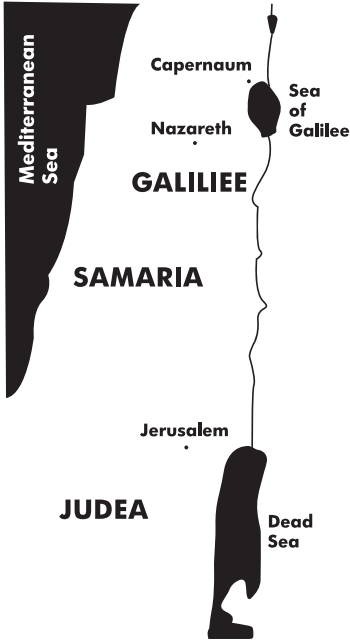
SEA OF GALILEE/LAKE OF GENESSERAT

Largest freshwater lake in Israel. Much of Jesus' ministry centers around the lake and the small fishing towns around the lake.

SAMARIA

Central area north of Jerusalem and South of Galilee. Home of the Samaritans.

MAP OF JERUSALEM



MAP OF JESUS' LAST HOURS

