

Unit 1 Introduction

Seeing Jesus Through the Gospel of Luke

Jesus is the single most important figure in history. His life and teaching are woven into the fabric of civilization. Jaroslav Pelikan, Yale University, observes in *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* that there would be little of civilization left if everything bearing at least some connection to Jesus were removed. No ruler, philosopher, teacher, artist, musician, or religious leader has approached the magnitude of influence found in Jesus. While Jesus' message can bring division, He is also a source of inspiration. Jesus belongs to the church, but also to culture. Images of Christ adorn museums and cathedrals around the world. The gospels call on all who read them to hear the radical and transforming message of Jesus Christ. He came to subvert systems that seek to define, control, marginalize, and enslave humanity. The reflections of Jesus are all around us, but we will never see Him until we saturate our mind with prayer. If we intend to study Jesus through the resources of our intellect alone, we will surely miss the person who came to redeem the world. He is the source of all truth and life. Christ has the capacity to radically change the condition of the heart. Whether it is art, literature, music, sculpture, history, or theology, Jesus is present in culture. The Gospel of Luke reminds us through every attempt to understand Jesus we must be willing to see the man who came to seek and to save the world.

The Gospels open windows into the life and ministry of Jesus. There is much to learn from the Jesus we find in Matthew, replete with rich references from the Old Testament. The fast-paced narrative of Jesus in Mark tells us a great deal about Jesus. John reflects on Jesus, sometimes providing clues regarding why Jesus asked a particular question or said something. Luke attempts to provide another explanation of Jesus. Together the four Gospels provide a full tapestry depicting the life and message of Jesus. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are talking about the same man and the same message, but each nuances that message in ways that enrich our understanding of the Savior. The existence of four Gospels should encourage us to understand the richness of Jesus' life and ministry.

Luke begins by expressing his intention, *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know*

the certainty of the things you have been taught (1:1-4).

The emphasis upon order is evident in this passage. Luke acknowledges that many have sought to provide an account of this man, Jesus. He also indicates that he has been careful in his study of eyewitness accounts because he is interested in getting at the truth. Seeing what Luke finds captivating will be instructive for the study of his gospel and what it says about the Savior of the world.

The angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would have a son named Jesus, "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David" (1:32). Attempting to understand this, Mary visits Elizabeth, her relative, to confirm that she bears a son as well. When Elizabeth sees Mary she says, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" (1:42b). From these humble beginnings the redeemer of the world will emerge. Mary responds "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors" (1:54-55). Luke positions Jesus within the promises of God to Israel. The extended treatment of Elizabeth and Mary brings humility and exaltation into view. Both are necessary to understand Jesus.

Shepherds living in the fields are told by an angel of the birth of Jesus and decide to "see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about" (2:15b). Once again Luke contrasts the heavenly and the earthly to illustrate the reach of God toward human beings. When Jesus is presented in the temple, a righteous man named Simeon takes the young child into his arms. While holding Jesus the man proclaims "my eyes have seen your salvation" (2:30). Luke writes about a prophet named Anna who upon seeing Jesus "gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:38). All of this amazed Mary and Joseph. These details further remind the reader that this baby is a redeemer. When Jesus was older His parents went to Jerusalem and on the way back Mary and Joseph discover that He is not with them. When they get back to the temple the teachers are in conversation with the young Jesus. The religious officials are amazed at the level of Jesus' understanding according to Luke. Once again the contrast between the educated teachers and the carpenter's son show the humanity and depth of understanding possessed by Jesus. When His parents find Him and begin to scold Him, Jesus says, "Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?" (2:49b). The words of Luke get to the heart of it, "and Jesus grew in wisdom and

in stature, and in favor with God and man” (2:52). The Jesus we see through the eyes of Luke is human and divine.

The genealogy provided by Luke differs widely from Matthew’s version. The drama of redemption is universal in scope for Luke. Combined with what we read in Matthew, the reader can begin to affirm that the baby born in Bethlehem is for the world: Jew and Gentile. Jesus is certainly not just a local hero for one region of the world. Luke wants to convey the manner in which God has worked to bring Jesus to this precise moment in history, for all of humankind.

Several unique aspects of the narrative of Jesus are depicted in Luke:

- The Annunciation (1:26-38)
- Mary’s Visit to Elizabeth (1:39-56)
- The Birth of John the Baptist (1:57-80)
- Circumcision and Appearance in the Temple (2:21-28)
- The Boy Jesus in the Temple (2:41-52)
- John Replies to Questions (3:10-14)
- Slightly Different Treatment of the Beatitudes (6:20b-23)
- Parable of the Lost Coin (15:8-10)
- Parable of the Lost Son (15:11-32)
- Parable of the Shrewd Manager (16:1-9)
- On Faithfulness in What is Least (16:10-12)
- We are Unprofitable Servants (17:7-10)
- Jesus Heals Ten Men with Leprosy (17:11-19)
- Coming of the Kingdom of God (17:20-21)
- Parable of the Persistent Widow (18:1-8)

While many convergences between the Gospels exist, Luke adds several events and lessons not included in the other four Gospels. The Jesus who heals and teaches is evident across the gospel narrative. Yet the Jesus we see through the eyes of Luke is very interested in linking the story of women like Mary and Elizabeth to the gospel story. We see the boy Jesus confounding the scholars in the temple. Luke is intent on showing the reader how God has brought greatness into view for those who will see. Even though Jesus is flesh and blood, He points to the transformation possible for mere human beings. John the Baptist says, “I baptize you with water; but the one

who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (3:16b). The Jesus we see through the eyes of Luke is baptized by John. This image shows that the Son of God submits to baptism just like all the people had done.

One of the most powerful parables in the New Testament is the prodigal son (15:11-32). This image embodies a great deal about the nature of Christ even as it judges the presumption of the elder brother. This parable is preceded by the parable of the lost sheep and lost coin, each illustrating the extent to which God goes to redeem. The prodigal son contrasts the brokenness of the prodigal with the presumption of the elder brother. The Jesus we see through Luke’s eyes is capable of extending redemption to both brothers. The Jesus we see in Luke seeks to find the lost and bring restoration as well as opening His arms to those who have no other place to go.

Luke writes “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited” (14:8). If a person sits at less honorable position than might be deserved, he/she might be invited to a more prestigious table. This underscores an essential gospel message; humility opens the door to honor in the kingdom of God. This is further suggested by the admonition “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” to a luncheon or banquet. People who do this will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. The Jesus we see through the eyes of Luke seeks those who need a physician, the hurting, and powerless people of the world.

Luke understands that amid the seemingly important empires of the world—space where the powerless reside—“A savior who is the Messiah, the Lord” has been born. His majesty is made plain by the humility of His birth. The Jesus we see through the eyes of Luke will reverse all the norms, values, ideals of civilization and in place of it show us “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel” (2:32). Amen!

HENRY SPAULDING II is the President of Mount Vernon Nazarene University, Mount Vernon, OH.