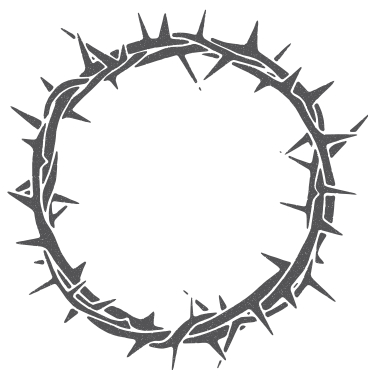


THE ESSENTIAL JESUS



READ
THE GOSPEL OF JESUS
FOR YOURSELF

 **matthiasmedia**
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

The Essential Jesus
Second edition
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Welcome to the story of the most extraordinary and influential man ever to have walked on this planet—Jesus of Nazareth.

The biography or ‘Gospel’ of Jesus’ life that you are about to read was written nearly 2000 years ago by a doctor named Luke. It’s been speaking to people of every background, race and situation ever since.

Reading the Gospel of Jesus is an opportunity to get back to the real Jesus, *the essential Jesus*, and to discover something new about yourself, about your world and about God.


Previously in the Bible...

The Gospel of Luke is a bit like an episode in a major TV series. If this is the first episode you've ever seen, some background is almost essential. To help you understand what's happening in the Gospel of Luke, who some of the characters are, and where we're up to in the story, here are four brief snapshots from "previously in the Bible..."

1. God creates the world

The Bible begins at the very beginning, with God creating the world and everything in it. Three very important pieces of background information flow out of this for reading Luke's Gospel:


- The "God" who keeps being mentioned in Luke is the God who rules the world. He made the world, and so he's in charge of it. He's the lord, the ruler, the king.
- Unlike most human rulers, God is loving and good. This is reflected in the extraordinary and beautiful world that he made. In fact, in the very first chapter of the Bible, God himself describes the world he has just created as being "very good."
- God also created humanity, and commissioned us to rule over the world. Our job is to care for the world and be responsible for it, all the while honoring and obeying him as our ruler, and thanking him for his generosity.




This snapshot from the opening chapters of Genesis (the first book of the Bible) paints a very appealing picture. It's like a perfect kingdom: God is the good and gracious king, and we are his loyal subjects, living in and enjoying the world God has made. It's like those opening scenes in a drama where everything is sunlight and trees and happy families playing on the lawn. You just know that something is about to go wrong.

2. Humanity rebels

A tragedy occurs early in the Bible's story that affects everything that follows. Not content with the good world that God has made and their high position in it, the first humans (Adam and Eve) reject God and his rule. They foolishly think that God might be holding out on them and denying them some of what is rightly theirs. So they take matters into their own hands and defy God's authority and his instructions. God's kingdom is split apart.



This human rebellion becomes one of the key themes in the rest of the Bible. (The Bible often uses the word "sin" to describe this rebellious stance against God.)



3. God the just Judge

The picture we get of God in the Bible is of the best kind of king and ruler—one who loves his people enough to take their rebellion seriously and to call them to account for their actions. When Adam and Eve disobey God, and reject his rule over them, they suffer the consequences. God judges them and gives them what they ask for. He separates them from himself, and lets them discover what life without him is like. But since God is the creator and source of all goodness and life, being cut off from him means frustration, decay and death—words that still describe our world today.

So what will happen? Is it the end of God's kingdom? Will God just leave it at that?

4. The cliffhanger

Most of the first half of the Bible (the Old Testament) is taken up with the beginnings of God's plan to rescue humanity and re-establish his kingdom.

That rescue plan starts with God choosing one man (Abraham), and through him a nation (Israel) to be his own special people. Through Israel, God promises to put the world right, and bring humanity back to himself.

However, not everything goes smoothly. Just like Adam and Eve, the Israelites end up rebelling against God. And they also suffer his judgment. So instead of continuing to live in the "Promised Land" that God had given them, they are invaded, defeated and taken away to live in a foreign country.

The first half of the Bible finishes with a cliffhanger. God's plan seems to be hanging by a thread, but there is hope.

The prophets of Israel had foretold the coming of a new king or 'Christ' who would re-establish the kingdom of God ("Christ" means "anointed one" or "king"). He would judge and destroy God's enemies, but bring rescue and salvation to his people. They would no longer be rebels, but loyal and loving subjects of the king.

These four snapshots from "previously in the Bible" give us an idea of what would have been in the minds of the original readers of Luke's Gospel. They were waiting for God to re-establish his kingdom. But as the Gospel of Luke opens, it is the beginning of the first century AD—some 400 years since the last of these prophecies of hope. The Israelites are back and living in their land, but it is not "theirs." They are ruled and occupied by the Romans, and their "king" (Herod) is a puppet of the Roman authorities.

Now read on...

The Gospel of Jesus, according to Luke

CHAPTER 1^a

Many have attempted to put together an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as these things were passed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the message. For this reason, it seemed good to me as well, having investigated everything thoroughly from the start, to write something orderly for you, Most Honourable Theophilus.^b My aim is that you may know the certainty of the message you were taught.

In the time of Herod, King of Judea,^c there was a priest called Zechariah from the priestly division of Abijah. He had a wife, Elizabeth, who was descended from the line of Aaron. They were both righteous people before God, living blamelessly according to all the commands and regulations of the Lord. Yet they had no children, because Elizabeth was infertile; and they were both elderly.

Now it happened that Zechariah's division was rostered to perform the priestly duties before God. And according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to go into the temple

^a Luke's Gospel was originally written in Greek, and contained no chapter divisions. These have been added for ease of reading and reference.

^b Many ancient pieces of literature were dedicated to important individuals, often the sponsor of the work.

^c Herod the Great ruled Jewish Palestine under the authority of the Romans from 37 BC to 4 BC.



of the Lord to burn incense. A large crowd outside the temple was praying at the time the incense was burned.

An angel^d of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right of the incense altar, and when he saw this, Zechariah was very troubled and afraid.

The angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayers have been heard—your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and a delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. He must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. He will turn many of the children of Israel back to the Lord their God, and he will go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah,^e to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and to turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous. He will prepare a people who are ready for the Lord.”

Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know this is true? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in age.”

The angel replied, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God. I was sent to speak to you, and make this important announcement to you. But you will be silent and not able to speak until the day these things come about, because you did not believe my message, which will be fulfilled in due course.”

In the meantime, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered why he was taking so long in the temple. When he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realised that he had seen a vision in the temple. He kept making signs to them, and remained mute.

When the time of Zechariah’s service came to an end, he went home. After this, Elizabeth his wife became pregnant. She kept herself out of public view for five months, saying, “So this is how the Lord has acted for me, when he looked kindly on me, and took away my disgrace among the people”.

^d The word ‘angel’ means ‘messenger’.

^e Elijah was one of the most famous prophets of the Old Testament, who challenged wayward Israel to come back to God. In one of the prophecies of the Old Testament, it was foretold that Elijah would one day return to Israel to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.





In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee^f called Nazareth, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph. Joseph was from the family line of David,^g and the virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, highly favoured one,^h the Lord is with you".

But when she heard this, Mary was deeply disturbed, and wondered what sort of greeting this could be.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. You will become pregnant, and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called 'Son of the Most High', and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will rule over the house of Jacobⁱ forever, and his kingdom will never end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit^j will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be holy, and will be called the Son of God. Look, even your cousin Elizabeth has conceived a son in her old age, and is in her sixth month—she who was said to be infertile. So nothing is impossible for God."

Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. May it all happen to me just as you have said." And the angel left her.

Soon after, Mary got ready and hurried to the hill country, to a city in Judah. She entered Zechariah's home, and called out a greeting to Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby kicked in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She declared in a loud voice, "You are blessed among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And who am I that the mother of my Lord should visit me? For as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby inside my womb kicked with joy. Blessed is she who believed that what the Lord said to her would be fulfilled."

f A region in northern Israel around Lake Galilee.

g Israel's greatest king.

h Literally, 'O one who has received a gracious gift'.

i 'House of Jacob' is another way of saying 'the family or nation of Israel'.

j That is, God's own Spirit.





And Mary said:

“My soul greatly honours the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices because of God my Saviour,
for he has taken notice of the humble state of his servant.
For from now on, every generation will call me blessed
because the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name,
and to generation after generation of people, he shows mercy
to those who fear him.
He has shown the strength of his arm, and scattered those who
are arrogant in their hearts;
he has knocked down rulers from their thrones; and he has
lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things; but the rich he has
sent away empty.
He has taken care of Israel, his son, remembering to be merciful,
just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham^k and his
descendants for ever.”

Mary remained with her for about three months, and then returned home.

Now the time finally came for Elizabeth to have her baby, and she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

On the eighth day, they came to have the boy circumcised, and they were going to name him after his father, Zechariah. But his mother said, “No, he is to be called John”.

They said to her, “No-one from your family has that name”. And they communicated with his father by signs, to see what he wanted to call him.

Zechariah asked for something to write on, and wrote, “His name is John”. And they were all amazed.

Immediately, Zechariah’s mouth was opened, and his tongue set free, and he began to praise God. And those who lived nearby were filled with awe, and in the Judean mountain region there was much

^k The ancestor of all the Israelites, the grandfather of Jacob (who was later renamed ‘Israel’).





discussion about all these events. Everyone who heard about it could not help wondering, “What then will this child turn out to be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him.

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people;
he has raised up a mighty Saviour^l for us in the family line of his servant, David,
just as he spoke through his holy prophets of old—
rescue^l from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us,
to show the mercy promised to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant,^m
an oath which he swore to our father Abraham—to grant us deliverance from the hand of our enemies, that we might serve him all our days without fear
in holiness and righteousness in his presence.
And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord, to prepare his way,
to make salvation^l known to his people by the forgiveness of their sins,
through the compassionate mercy of our God, which will visit us like a sunrise from on high,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The boy grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until the time when he appeared publicly to Israel.

CHAPTER 2

In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus to conduct a census of the Roman world—this was the first census that took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria. So everyone travelled

l ‘Rescue/rescuer’ and ‘salvation/saviour’ mean the same thing.

m A covenant is a binding promise, usually with obligations and responsibilities attached. In this case, it refers to the covenant God made with Abraham.



Where to from here?

Everybody who met the real Jesus in the flesh had a reaction. You've just met him through the pages of this book. What reaction do you have, and what should you do about it?

It would be a mistake to be like the rich leader in chapter 18, who met Jesus but chose his money (p. 56).

Or to be like the religious Pharisees, who listened to what Jesus had to say but preferred to trust in their own goodness (p. 56).

Much better to be like the runaway younger son in chapter 15, who made some bad choices but decided to come home (p. 50).

Whatever your reaction to Jesus, it would be helpful to talk about it with someone who has been following Jesus for a while. You might like to:

- **Connect** with the person or group who gave you this book.
- **Visit** the website printed on the back cover.
- **Find** a local church that teaches the Bible.

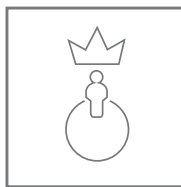
In the next few pages, you'll find a useful summary of the Gospel of Jesus and what it means.

Why Jesus is essential

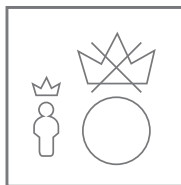
Luke's Gospel tells us a lot about Jesus—about who he was, and what he said and did. What does it mean for us today?

To answer that, we need to remind ourselves of what happened “previously in the Bible” (see pages 4-6). Three main points came out of the first half of the Bible:

1. God is the good and loving creator of the world, and therefore is its ruler and king. God created humanity too, and put us in charge of the world, but under his authority, thanking him for his generosity. This could be illustrated like this, with a crown representing God's authority:



2. From the beginning, we rebelled against our creator and ruler, rejecting his authority. The very first humans did this, and we have all been doing it ever since. We don't thank, honour and obey God. We follow our own desires, living by the values we decide are best. We act like little “gods,” each of us doing things our own way.



3. Rebelling against the good God who made us dishonors him and damages ourselves, each other and the world. God is too good and too just to let that rebellion continue. We experience God's judgment against our rebellion in the reality of suffering and death.

But there is a further judgment that we will face. We will all one day stand before God, and be held to account for the damage we have done and for our personal rejection of him as

