



**“My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” Luke 2:30–32**

# Jesus, the Compassionate Savior (Part 1)

**L**uke was a gifted writer with an excellent command of the Greek language. He could have chosen any number of forms in which to communicate the good news of Jesus: a letter, like Paul; a homily, like the author of Hebrews; an apocalypse, like John in Revelation. Luke’s work is not a catechism or a theological treatise. Rather, Luke chose to write a narrative, “an orderly account of the events” (1:1), a form of literature that many had employed before him.

As a narrative, the gospel of Luke presents the storyline of Jesus’ life in order to assure his readers of “the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed” (1:4). Luke’s readers had already been instructed in Christian teaching and the core events of the life of Jesus. But Luke wants to present those events in a way that engages his readers and presents the events of salvation in a grand narrative.

He tells the story not merely as a historical record, but in a way that enables readers to enter the story themselves and to discover it as their own good news. To do this effectively, Luke presents the episodes from the life of Jesus with great detail and concreteness. The narrative uses language that evokes the imagination of the readers and presents episodes from the life of Jesus that become significant within the individual lives of the readers. Luke's artistic description of each scene minimizes his need for long discourses. A brief dialogue or a short saying is enough to engage the readers and communicate the message.

Luke addresses his work to a certain "Theophilus" (1:3), a Gentile man of rank and a recent convert to Christianity. The shape of Luke's gospel suggests that Theophilus was experiencing uncertainty about his place in a movement that was originally Jewish. Yet, Luke did not write just for one person, but for any non-Jew who felt out of place in the church. Theophilus, whose name means "beloved of God," represents all Gentiles seeking to understand God's universal plan of salvation.

Still, after nearly two millennia, Luke's narrative draws in readers who come to experience the story of Jesus as their own. The gospel becomes truly good news for the lives of people today in every nation, of every race, language, and culture. Luke continues to show people how the stories of Jesus transcend their setting in first-century Palestine to speak powerfully to people today.

As we read his narrative, Luke invites us to listen to the word of God and to put it into practice. We can do that by following the example of Mary who reflected on the events of Jesus' life in her heart (2:19, 51). She is the ideal disciple—the one who hears the word of God and observes it (11:28). That is our challenge as we read the narrative of Luke—to become disciples of Jesus by listening, reflecting, and doing the word of God today.

## Reflection and discussion

- Why did Luke choose "narrative" as the literary form for communicating the good news of Jesus Christ?

- How can Luke's writings from the ancient world become truly good news for people today?

## **The Gospel of Salvation for All**

Jesus is continually doing the unexpected in Luke's gospel. He upsets people's routine manner of thinking about God's ways and about what salvation means. As we enter the narrative of Luke we should expect to be surprised and even upset at Jesus because he challenges our routine ways of thinking about God. If we are not astounded or disturbed, then we are not reading the gospel afresh. God is the one who casts rulers from their thrones and lifts up the lowly, the one who fills the hungry and empties the rich. When Mary first heard this good news of God's intervention in her life, she was stunned. God wants to intervene in our lives too. Let us expect to be disturbed and changed as we come to experience the story of Jesus as our own.

One of the most obvious characteristics of the writings of Luke is his inclusiveness. All people can come to Jesus and be included in his offer of salvation: the poor and the rich, the Gentiles and the Jews, women and men, foreigners and Israelites, the healthy and the sick, the sinners and the saints. Jesus associates with the sinners, prostitutes, and tax collectors, and he even shares table fellowship with them. The inclusiveness of Jesus' love for all people extends even to those who crucify him, and is demonstrated in his prayer for their forgiveness. Our call to evangelize is rooted in the mission he gave his church to extend his salvation to all people.

The gospel presents a new way of relating to God by turning to him through Jesus. This plan of God for salvation includes peoples of all ethnicities and backgrounds. The mission of Jesus is stated in several forms: he came "to bring good news to the poor" (4:18), "to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance" (5:32), "to seek out and to save the lost" (19:10). Luke shows that all who are needy can encounter a concerned and compassionate God

through Jesus. As Savior, Messiah, and Lord (2:11), Jesus is the divine instrument of God's plan to save the world. His message is one of hope and transformation. God's promises, revealed in the ancient Scriptures, are fulfilled for all who turn to Jesus, reorient their lives, and trust in him. This salvation involves sharing in hope, receiving forgiveness, experiencing God's kingdom, and being enlivened by the Holy Spirit. Such care and compassion know no boundaries of race, gender, or class.

Luke's gospel should be read within the context of Luke's two-volume work: the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Acts is a continuation of the narrative of the gospel. It begins when Jesus is taken up into heaven, and it tells the story of the early church. Volume one is the gospel of Jesus Christ; volume two may be called the good news of the Holy Spirit. The two volumes form one continuous narrative, showing the spread of God's salvation from ancient Israel to all the nations of the earth. Luke writes his gospel in a way that demonstrates how the ministry of Jesus relates to the life of the early church and how being disciples of Jesus means belonging to the people who continue to follow him as the resurrected Savior and universal Lord.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- What does it mean to me to acknowledge Jesus as the Savior?

- What might be an important message that Luke's gospel could offer to people in our culture today?

## Prayer Is the Heart of Luke's Gospel

Luke's writing is filled with a spirit of prayer. This prayerful tone is conveyed to us in several ways in his gospel. First, the gospel contains four prayers that have become the most exalted prayers of the church through the ages. Second, Luke shows Jesus at prayer more than any other evangelist. Jesus prays often during his public life and demonstrates that regular prayer is essential for anyone who wants to follow in his way. Third, Luke shows Jesus teaching his disciples to pray and includes several teachings and parables about prayer that are found only in his gospel.

The four prayers from Luke's gospel come to us on the lips of four prayerful people whose examples teach us to pray: Zechariah, Mary, Simeon, and Jesus. These four prayers have been incorporated in the liturgical prayer of the church. The church's morning prayer culminates in the prayer of Zechariah: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel..." (Luke 1:68–79). The evening liturgical prayer leads up to the prayer of Mary: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." (1:46–55). Both of these hours of prayer conclude with the prayer that Jesus taught, the prayer that is included in the Communion rite of every Eucharistic liturgy, his prayer to the Father (11:2–4). Finally, the night prayer of the church features the prayer of Simeon: "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word..." (2:29–32).

Throughout his gospel, Luke continually makes special note of the fact that Jesus prayed. These times in which Jesus is described as being at prayer are mostly moments of revelation, decision, and transition in the gospel. Luke is the only gospel to state that Jesus was praying after his baptism (3:21). His prayer continues through the descent of the Holy Spirit and the voice of God from heaven declaring Jesus his beloved Son. This critical moment at the inauguration of Jesus' public life takes place within the context of Jesus' prayerful communication with the Father.

Like the revelation of Jesus at his baptism, his revelation at the scene of transfiguration also takes place in the context of prayerful communion with God. Jesus "went up on the mountain to pray" and the appearance of Jesus was transfigured "while he was praying" (9:28–29). At both the baptism and transfiguration of Jesus, Luke tells his readers that prayer must be the setting in which we discover and discern the significance of Jesus for our lives.

Luke is careful to note that Jesus demonstrated a balance between his public ministry and his life of solitary prayer. He reports that great crowds assembled to listen to the teaching of Jesus and to be cured of illnesses. However, Luke says, Jesus “would withdraw to deserted places and pray” (5:16). The tense of the Greek verb here suggests that the withdrawal of Jesus for prayer was a repeated action. Jesus would periodically withdraw for the purpose of prayer during his busy public life.

Luke tells us that Jesus, before choosing the twelve apostles, “went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God” (6:12). His praying on the mountain throughout the night enabled him to make that critical choice wisely and confidently. Another critical moment of the gospel occurs when Jesus questions his disciples concerning his identity: “Who do the crowds say that I am? Who do you say that I am?” Only Luke sets this crucial scene in the context of prayer: “Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him” (9:18). Jesus could have been praying privately while his disciples were around him, or Jesus could have been praying with his disciples but away from the crowds. Either way, the scene teaches us that discerning the identity of Jesus and who he is in our lives is done best in quiet, reflective prayer.

Finally, Luke shows us that prayer was the context in which Jesus began and ended his passion. At the Last Supper Jesus tells Peter, “I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail” (22:32), as he foretells Peter’s denial and repentance. When Jesus went to the Mount of Olives before his arrest, Luke notes that he went to a particular place where he prayed regularly. There Jesus asked his closest disciples to pray. And he withdrew from them a ways and then knelt down to pray intensely to his Father (22:39–41). Jesus prays in agony, asking that the cup of suffering pass from him, but also surrendering himself to the Father’s will. At the end of his passion, the final words of Jesus are from Israel’s book of prayer, the Psalms. “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (23:46; Psalm 31:5) is the prayer of Jesus from the cross as he breathed his last.

The disciples must have seen Jesus go away often for times of prayer. They saw how important prayer was for Jesus, and they saw how Jesus prayed in all the critical moments of his life. Jesus gave silent witness to the value of prayer, and it was this personal witness that inspired his disciples to request that he teach them to pray. Luke tells us that Jesus “was praying in a certain place, and

after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray’” (11:1). Luke invites us, his readers, to go off with Jesus and to learn from him how to pray.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray as he prayed (11:2–4). The prayer is addressed to God as Father, showing disciples that we can share in Jesus’ intimate relationship with God. It is simple and direct; it praises God, requests the basic needs of life, and asks for God’s forgiveness. It is the prayer the Christian community has continued to pray since the days of Jesus.

The Lord’s Prayer in Luke is followed by teachings of Jesus about prayer. Jesus exhorts his disciples to be persistent in prayer by telling of a man who came to a friend in the middle of the night to borrow bread for a traveler to whom he was offering hospitality. Though the friend did not get up immediately, he eventually got up to “give him whatever he needs” because of the man’s persistence in asking (11:5–8). Jesus teaches persistence in prayer not because we have to convince God to answer us or to wear down God’s resistance. Jesus teaches persistence, rather, to overcome our tendency to give up on prayer too easily or to pray too sporadically.

Jesus then urges the disciples to pray with confidence. Though we may sometimes wonder whether our prayers are heard by God, Jesus declares, “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you” (11:9). He compares the generosity of an earthly father with the lavish generosity of God. Jesus concludes this teaching by asking, “If you then...know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (11:13). We can have the utmost confidence because God is more than a friend; God is a loving Father who knows and responds to all our needs.

In another section of the gospel, Jesus teaches about prayer by telling two parables. The point of the first parable is provided by Luke’s introduction: “Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart” (18:1). In the parable a widow continues to insist on her rights from a corrupt and dishonest judge. Because of her persistence, the judge rendered a favorable decision for her (18:2–5). “Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night?” (18:7), Jesus asks. We might not think that God is hearing our prayer; we might get discouraged and quit praying when we do not seem to get results. But we ought never to lose heart; we can trust in God to answer our prayers.

The second parable tells of a Pharisee and a tax collector who both went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee told God all that he was doing and bragged about his “spiritual” accomplishments (18:11–12). The tax collector, in contrast, beat his breast and offered a simple and humble prayer: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (18:13). The parable teaches us to express our dependence on God’s mercy, aware of our need of forgiveness and grace.

Jesus’ final teaching on prayer comes as he enters his passion and is praying on the Mount of Olives. He told his disciples, “Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial” (22:46). As Jesus was experiencing his prayerful agony, he was teaching his disciples to pray in times of tribulation and turmoil. As Jesus demonstrates, prayer can be an act of desperation in the critical moments of life. It can be what we do when we don’t know what else can be done.

In all of these ways, Luke shows that prayer is the heart of the gospel. By showing his disciples how to pray, when to pray, and why to pray, Jesus encourages them to be a prayerful community. These teachings of Jesus take root in the disciples, and so the Acts of the Apostles demonstrates that prayer is at the heart of the early church. The community of disciples takes the teachings of Jesus to heart and prays, not only at times of decision and transition in the church, but as part of the regular rhythm of Christian life. In this way, Luke’s gospel continually forms each generation of disciples into a community of prayer.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- What are the moments in the life of Jesus in which Luke spotlights the prayer of Jesus?



- How does the example of Jesus' prayer in the gospel encourage and inspire my own life of prayer?

### **Learning to Read Luke's Good News**

There is a tradition retained in Greek Orthodox Christianity that Luke was a painter. Whether or not there is any historical validity to this understanding, we can imagine Luke painting many of the scenes that he so vividly describes in his gospel. If he didn't paint with oils, we know that he certainly painted with words. And the beautiful images he gives us in his gospel have inspired artists through the centuries of Christianity to present his gospel stories in frescoes, mosaics, icons, stained glass, and canvas.

Learning how to appreciate a work of art can also teach us about how to approach the Scriptures. Sometimes we read the Bible with too much emphasis on simply learning information, on understanding what the text says. Understanding the Scriptures does not necessarily mean being able to interpret every sentence on every page. Sometimes what we need to do is simply reflect in wonder on the images presented in the sacred text and notice the emotions that arise in our hearts. This seems to be what Mary did. She had a contemplative sense of wonder toward these divine mysteries. She kept all of these things and pondered them in her heart. We can learn from Mary how to reflectively ponder the good news of her Son as a work of art.

A second ancient tradition claims that Luke was a physician. In fact, Paul refers to Luke in his letter to the Colossians as "the beloved physician" (Col 4:14). Whether or not Luke practiced as a medical doctor, we can be sure that Luke was a person very sensitive to people in need. His gospel reflects more than any other gospel the human needs of the poor, ill, and suffering. Perhaps this description of Luke can help us learn to read the gospel with another emphasis. When Luke describes scenes of people who are ill or cast aside, he is encouraging us to look for similar scenes in our own world, and then to do

something about them. The gospel of Luke invites us to be instruments in the healing of others in order to be disciples in our own world today. Like Mary, we can become active contemplatives, “those who hear the word of God and do it” (8:21).

Finally, Luke is known in the Christian tradition as a companion of Paul. In his letter to Philemon, Paul mentions Luke as one of his “fellow workers” (Phlm 24). In recounting Paul’s travels in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke often uses the pronoun “we.” These so-called “we” sections portray the author as a traveling companion of Paul. With the great “apostle to the Gentiles,” Luke learned to evangelize, to proclaim the gospel in word and in deed, with passion and with love. Contemplating his gospel can help us, too, be ardent disciples, devoted to helping others know and understand the good news of Jesus Christ as God’s plan for the world’s salvation.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- How can I better appreciate the gospel by understanding Luke’s work as that of a literary artist?
- What am I hoping to experience as I begin to study and reflect on this Gospel according to Luke?

## Prayer

*Lord God, you raised up Luke among the peoples of the Gentile world to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ and to evangelize through writing this narrative of his life. Prepare my heart to encounter Jesus through the pages of this Gospel according to Luke. Stir up within me a deep desire to know and follow him more deeply and personally. Show me how to take these words to heart and to meditate upon them. Help me to respond to the invitation of Jesus to listen, reflect, and do the word of God today. Keep me faithful these weeks to the challenges of study and prayer that your word offers to me.*

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