



“Today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” Luke 13:33

Jesus, the Compassionate Savior (Part 2)

At the end of Luke’s gospel, we find the risen Jesus walking beside two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus, explaining the Scriptures to them. Later when these two disciples recognize Jesus at table with them, they reflect on their journey with him: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked to us on the road, while he was opening the Scriptures to us?” (24:32). As we read and reflect on the gospel of Luke, we are like those disciples on the road, as Jesus opens the Scriptures to us. The gospel is not just the historical record of what Jesus said and did. It is God’s living word. Through this living word, Jesus speaks to us and reveals himself personally to us. Every phrase of the gospel is like a burning ember that has the potential to spark off the page and spread. We can expect our hearts to catch flame and burn with desire within us as we encounter Jesus through God’s word. We can expect to hear him speak and to enlighten us as he opens the Scripture to us.

Luke is the only gospel to describe the preaching and teachings of Jesus as “the word of God” (5:1). Through the proclamation of the good news and the teachings of Jesus on the kingdom, God addresses his people. As the prophets spoke the word of God as recorded in the Scriptures of Israel, Jesus speaks so that people will hear the word of God. By comparing God’s word to a seed in his parable of the sower (8:11), Jesus describes how God sows the word indiscriminately to all people, regardless of the condition of their lives. The task of the hearers of the word is to prepare the ground of their hearts to receive that word and allow it to take root, grow, and bear fruit. “Those who hear the word of God and do it” are those who are truly blessed (8:21; 11:28).

Through Luke’s use of “the word of God” in the Acts of the Apostles to refer to the proclamation of the gospel by the early church, he links Jesus’ preaching and teaching with that of the apostles. Indeed, he describes the mission of the church itself as the expansion and growth of the word of God (Acts 6:7; 8:14; 11:1; 12:24; 19:20). The prophets of old spoke God’s word through the Spirit of God, that same Holy Spirit anointed Jesus to speak good news, and the Holy Spirit impelled the apostolic church to spread the word of God. In this same sense, the Torah and prophets of the Old Testament, the good news written by Luke and other evangelists, and the writings of the apostles and other ministers of the word in the New Testament are all inspired by the Holy Spirit to deliver the word of God to his people. Of all these sacred writings, we can truly proclaim, “The word of the Lord.”

When these writings—“the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms” (24:44), and the gospel, the Acts, and the New Testament writings—are proclaimed in Christian liturgy, we can be assured that the risen Lord will open our minds to understand the Scriptures, just as he opened the minds of his disciples in Jerusalem (24:45). We can also rest with confidence that when we read the Scriptures in faith, we can expect our hearts to catch fire as we listen to God speak to us, just as the hearts of the disciples were burning within them as Jesus opened the Scriptures to them on the road to Emmaus. Our challenge is to take away the obstacles that prevent God’s word from flourishing in our lives and to become disciples by listening, understanding, praying, and doing the word of God today.

Reflection and discussion

- What difference does it make in my study of the gospel to trust that it is God's living word?

- How does Luke convince his readers that all Scripture is inspired and speaks the word of God?

The Journey to Jerusalem

A large part of the second half of Luke's gospel consists of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Immediately after his Transfiguration, in which Moses and Elijah appeared in glory with Jesus and spoke about his "exodus" which he would accomplish in Jerusalem (9:31), Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51). For the next ten chapters, Luke sets the teachings of Jesus within the context of this journey toward the city in which his death and resurrection will take place.

For Luke, Jerusalem is the goal of Jesus' mission, but the journey toward Jerusalem is also important. Luke presents the journey as a time of training and formation for his disciples, and in this section, Luke presents the bulk of Jesus' teaching. The road that Jesus followed is also the way his followers must travel. This kind of journey involves change and often hardships. Along the road Jesus clarifies the nature and demands of discipleship. Whereas in Jesus' ministry in Galilee, Jesus ministered primarily to the crowds, in his journey to Jerusalem, he speaks directly to his closest followers.

This part of the gospel contains lots of material that is found only in Luke. For example, through the marvelous parables of the good Samaritan, the rich fool, the barren fig tree, the lost coin, the prodigal son, the shrewd manager, and the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus illustrates for his disciples the ways of God's kingdom. Only in this gospel do we find Jesus' teachings on humility, on whom to invite for dinner, on seeking places of honor, and on the importance of counting the costs of discipleship. In this section, we find the story of Martha and Mary, which narrates the necessary dimensions of discipleship, and the description of Zacchaeus, who shows the only way a rich person can be a disciple. These accounts set Luke apart from the other three gospels and demonstrate how Jesus guides his disciples to become his church.

Using the journey as a theological metaphor, Luke invites his readers to accompany Jesus as he makes his way to Jerusalem. As the road to Jerusalem with Jesus was a time of training, preparation, and growth, so it is for us. Luke's readers travel into discipleship, learning what it means to follow Jesus and to participate in the reign of God. This journey of the spiritual life is the process of coming to know Jesus and learning to follow in his way. Along the way we must always be learning from Jesus, and we must continually be changing as we take his words to heart and follow in his way.

As Luke's readers, we know that our journey is also the journey of the church. In fact, throughout the Acts of the Apostles, Luke describes the church as "the Way," another term for expressing the journey of discipleship. And just as the disciples were accompanied by the Risen Jesus on their journey to Emmaus, we know that we are accompanied by the Lord and guided by the Holy Spirit.

Reflection and discussion

- What are some of the differences between the first and second half of Luke's gospel?

- In what way is my own growing relationship with Jesus like a road, way, or journey?

Compassion for the Lost and the Outcasts

One of the primary characteristics of Jesus' ministry, particularly as Luke presents it, is his care for those who are marginalized. This concern for those in need is presented in the inaugural scene in the synagogue at Nazareth in which Jesus presents his mission as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, bringing good news to the poor, release to captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to captives (4:18). The kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus seems to be characterized by a reversal of the world's status quo. He announces that those who are poor, hungry, and weeping are the ones who are now blessed (6:20–21). In fact, those who are hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed because of following Jesus are those who should rejoice and leap for joy (6:22–23).

Luke's gospel has an especially large number of teachings about money, greed, and possessions. The parable of the rich fool indicates the absurdity of greed and the futility of accumulating possessions (12:16–21). The parable of the rich man and Lazarus emphasizes that the conditions of the poor man and the rich man are reversed at death. By including these parables, Luke is urging Theophilus and his other readers to be detached from material possessions and to share them with those in need.

Because of the way that Jesus attracted the marginalized, he became known as the one who welcomes and eats with tax collectors and sinners (15:1–2). Table fellowship is emphasized throughout Luke's gospel, and Jesus is depicted frequently as sharing meals with outcasts and peppering his teaching with references to food, banquets, and feasts. In the parable of the great banquet, expressing the inclusiveness and abundance of God's kingdom, the host sends his servant out into the city streets and back alleys of the town to invite the poor, disabled, and outcasts. When there is still room left at the table, he sends

the servants out to the roads outside the town, encouraging everyone to attend from all directions (14:21–23).

Jesus' saving ministry is characterized by seeking out and finding the lost. His parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son illustrate the joy in heaven over a single sinner who repents. When Zacchaeus, the wealthy tax collector, becomes a disciple, Jesus declares that he himself has come "to seek out and to save the lost" (19:10). The point of each story is that God will go to great efforts and rejoice with great joy to find and restore a sinner to himself. Jesus shows himself to be a model for his disciples. Their mission, like that of Jesus, is to love people and draw them to God. They must reflect his concern and compassion, seeking out the lost and rejoicing with the heavens over every repentant sinner.

Jesus' care for the outcasts reaches its climax on the cross. The one who has sought to save sinners and seek out the lost throughout his life now asks God's forgiveness for his torturers (23:34). Jesus dies between two criminals, breathing his last with the same kind of people with whom he associated throughout his ministry. His words of mercy for his executioners seem to have inspired one of the two criminals crucified with him to repent and place his faith in Jesus. The words of Jesus, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise," solemnly declare that he can and does save those who turn to him. This reconciled criminal is the final example and result of Jesus' mission to call sinners to repentance, to seek out and save the lost.

Reflection and discussion

- In what ways does Luke emphasize the theme of reversal throughout his gospel?

- How might reflecting on Luke's gospel begin to change my priorities and the focus of my life?

The Holy Spirit: From the Gospel to Acts

At the beginning of Luke's gospel, the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary to give birth to Jesus. The Holy Spirit then animates and leads Jesus throughout the gospel's presentation of his saving ministry. At the beginning of Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary and the apostles to give birth to the church. The same Holy Spirit then animates and leads the church throughout its foundational days as presented in Acts.

Throughout his life Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit, empowering him to pray, to teach, and to heal. After his baptism by John, the Holy Spirit descends upon him in a manifest way (3:22), and then Jesus, "full of the Holy Spirit," is led by the Spirit into the wilderness (4:1). In the first act of his public ministry in Nazareth, Jesus declares that the words of the prophet are fulfilled: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (4:18). Luke notes that Jesus "rejoiced in the Holy Spirit" as he prayed to his Father (10:21).

Luke highlights the role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life because he wants to emphasize the Spirit's role in the life of his readers. Jesus promises that the Father will "give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (11:13), and at the end of the gospel the risen Jesus instructs the apostles to wait in Jerusalem because he is sending upon them what the Father promised, the gift of the Holy Spirit to clothe them with power from on high (24:49). The Holy Spirit's guidance and empowerment in the life of Jesus sets the pattern for the Spirit's work in the lives of his followers.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit animates the whole church in its evangelizing mission. In Acts, Luke mentions the Holy Spirit over fifty times, so much so that some have suggested that the book might be better entitled the Acts of the Holy Spirit. As we read and reflect on Luke's gospel, we should

be aware that the same Spirit who breathed in Luke as he wrote lives today within the church and works within each of us as we read Luke's inspired work. God binds his own Spirit into these texts and meets us on the holy ground of these sacred pages.

Reflection and discussion

- What wisdom have I been given while studying the first part of Luke's gospel that will guide me as I continue?
- How do I expect the Holy Spirit to work within me during these weeks of reading and reflecting on Luke's gospel?

Prayer

Father of the poor and the lost, send your Holy Spirit upon me as I continue to listen to your word through the words and deeds of Jesus your Son. As I continue to study this gospel of Luke, help me to keep changing and growing as I learn and pray. May I follow Jesus along the journey to Jerusalem, listening to his teachings and learning from him the way of discipleship. As the risen Jesus opened the minds of his disciples to understand the Scriptures, let me trust in his guiding presence with me as I seek to understand your word in this holy gospel.