

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Gordon Kell

The Gospel writers and their subject - Luke

Can you imagine what it would be like to live in a world without a National Health Service? To have no running water or proper sewage system. A world in which even the simplest of diseases could become life threatening. No anaesthetics, no antibiotics. This was the world Luke lived in. He lived in it as a doctor with few medicines to cure the enormous needs which confronted him.

Why was he chosen to write one of the Gospels? It has often impressed me that the Holy Spirit of God chose not only the subjects of Scripture but the writers of Scripture. The four Gospels give four views of Christ. The first one, Matthew, presents Jesus as the Messiah King. Matthew was a tax collector running a despised business in a partnership with the occupying Roman authorities. As far as his fellow countrymen were concerned, he had betrayed his country for financial gain. Then Jesus called him to become a disciple and the Spirit of God uses this converted tax collector to write the Gospel which presents the Messiah King to Israel.

Mark is the Gospel which describes the Lord Jesus as the Servant. John Mark was a bright young Christian at the very centre of the early church. He became one of the first missionaries with Paul and Barnabas. But he found the mission field a hard place and returned to Jerusalem. Paul refused to take him on his second missionary journey because he had failed in service and Paul felt Mark was unreliable. His uncle Barnabas takes him to Cyprus and by his pastoral care helps his young nephew. So that, at the end of Paul's writings in 2 Timothy, we see John Mark restored and Paul commending him with affection as a useful servant of God. To Mark, the Spirit of God says, "You write about Jesus as the Servant of God". Isn't God's grace wonderful?!

John writes the fourth Gospel about Jesus as the Son of God. John in this Gospel refers to himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved. He had a very close relationship with the Saviour as did his brother James and also Peter. It is to John that the Lord speaks from the cross and asks him to take care of His mother. To this faithful disciple, who knew the Lord in such a close way, the Spirit of God says, "You write about the wonderful relationship between God the Father and God the Son".

What about Luke? He understood more than most, as a doctor, the enormous and complex needs of mankind. Needs for which he had very limited resources. He was also the only Gospel writer who was a Gentile. He had not had the privilege of a Jewish upbringing and the blessings bestowed on that nation. How he came to the Saviour we are not sure but the effect the Saviour had on this beloved doctor is undoubted. He had met in Jesus a Saviour who was able to meet all the needs of a suffering world and to remove all the distance which existed between God and man. To this compassionate Gentile physician the Spirit of God says, "You write about Jesus as the Son of Man". God became man to meet all the needs of the world. This is the theme which pours out of Luke's heart. In the words of David in Psalm 45, Luke's tongue was "the pen of a ready writer".

The warmth of Luke's Gospel is touching. He writes to a friend called Theophilus and it's as though he was writing a personal letter to us all. Immediately he introduces the human relationships and the world into which Jesus would be born. His historical accuracy in describing a world dominated by the Roman Empire adds to the reality of his narrative. Only Matthew and Luke write of the circumstances and events of Christ's birth. Matthew from a Jewish background, Luke as Gentile. But Luke gives more detail. He teaches us about the wonder of God coming into the world. He immediately introduces the miraculous events surrounding John the Baptist's birth before teaching us the vital truths of the immaculate conception and virgin birth of Christ. He also introduces the worship which flowed from the hearts of Elizabeth and Mary. He describes ordinary people overcome by the extraordinary intervention of God's Son being born into the world. To Luke, the mighty world power of Rome and the authority of Caesar Augustus to order a census of the empire were simple tools in the hand of God to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. Luke records the amazing grace of God as Jesus was born in manger "because there was no room in the inn." How his simple words describe so deeply the reality of the Lord of glory entering into His creation as a homeless child!

It is in the hearts of simple people that Luke traces God's goodness. He alone, tells us about the angels' glorious appearing to the shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem. He gives us God's message to the world that holy night, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!" Luke as one of these "all men" knew God's peace and goodness in his heart. He traces the development of the Lord's life in this world. He alone tells us of the

Lord as a baby being taken into the temple. His parents came with two turtle doves as a sacrifice. It was the sacrifice of poor people and demonstrated the reality of the Lord Jesus entering for us into all the poverty of this world. But the effect the Child had upon the hearts of faithful men and women like Simeon and Anna showed He had also come in power. The powerful mystery of the creator God being held in the arms of His old servant, Simeon, who said “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; For my eyes have seen Your salvation” (Luke 2:29-30).

Luke’s amazement at the Son of Man here in the world continues as he records the young boy Jesus staying behind in Jerusalem to confound the wisest men of the day. The “Ancient of Days” as a twelve year old! Luke gives us the first words of Jesus; “Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My father’s business?” Luke also records the subjection of Jesus as He takes His place in family life and increases in wisdom and stature.

After the baptism of Jesus, in chapter 3, and the beginning of his ministry when He was about thirty years old, Luke lists the genealogy of the Lord. Matthew outlines the Lord’s genealogy forward from Abraham. He was tracing the ancestry of a King. Luke lists the Lord’s genealogy backwards to the first man, Adam. He was tracing the ancestry of a man. Luke was demonstrating the wonder of God coming into the world as a man.

The reason for His coming is given in Luke 4. It begins with the testing of Jesus by the Devil. Although Mark also mentions this, only Matthew and Luke give us the detail. Luke shows that, as a man, Jesus overcomes the power of the devil by the word of God. God comes down into His world as a man and meets, at the beginning of His public ministry, man’s greatest enemy - Satan - whom He defeats through His own word. At last, there was present in this world One who was stronger than Satan! Following this victory, Jesus goes to His own city of Nazareth. Luke uses a wonderful expression about the Lord and Nazareth in Luke 4:16, “So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up.” The Son of God growing up in all the poverty and need of this despised city! Luke describes in the briefest of words the greatness of the grace of Christ in not only entering into, but living in, the midst of this world’s need.

Human relationships are important to Luke and he reminds us that one of the first places where Jesus ministers is the most difficult of places, Nazareth, where He had grown up, where He was known. In the local synagogue He turns to the prophet of Isaiah to describe why He had come as a man into the world. He had come to preach, to heal, to set free, to give sight. You can see why these words meant so much to Luke. In a world where he had seen human suffering in all its forms and had been helpless to do much to change it, he writes about the Saviour who had the power to meet every need. But he also, and with some feeling, describes the rejection of the Lord when Jesus describes His people as saying to Him, “Physician, heal yourself”.

In Luke 10, Luke presents one of most wonderful healing stories - the story of the Good Samaritan. In March this year I drove down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It runs through desolate countryside down to the Dead Sea, some 1,400 feet below sea level. On this road the man, in the Lord’s parable, was attacked by thieves and left half dead. As the priest and Levite approached, he must have thought help was at hand only to see them pass by on the other side. When the Samaritan came towards, him he must have thought there was no chance of help. But it was the Samaritan, so disliked by the Jews, who “came where he was”. Luke, himself a Gentile, records Jesus’ story of how He came as a stranger into a world He loved. How He came to where we were in all our need to save, heal and bring us to a place of safety and fellowship. Only Luke tells this powerful parable about Christ’s complete salvation.

At the end of chapter 10, there is also a cameo about the house at Bethany which belonged to Martha. Luke uses it to explain to us the importance of valuing the Lord Jesus. To the world, Jesus may be a Samaritan stranger but He should have the central place in the Christian’s life. Martha was a strong forthright woman of great energy and wonderful hospitality. Her sister seems to have been a quiet contemplative woman who delighted in the Saviour’s presence and sat at His feet to hear His word. Martha became upset because her sister was not helping her in the work of entertaining. But the Lord commends Mary for taking the time to be in His presence. The Lord was not commending laziness but highlighting a critical part of discipleship: the need to make time to be in the presence of the Saviour and to hear His words. This alone equips us to serve Him well and to become good workers and worshippers, as both Martha and Mary are shown to be at the beginning of the John 12.

In Luke 15, Luke also uniquely describes the trilogy of God’s love in the Lord’s three parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. Once more, it is those who are at a distance from God who set the scene for this marvellous chapter. The tax collectors and sinners were the willing listeners to what the Lord had to say. Luke is concerned about the outsiders. He knew so well not only the physical but also the moral and spiritual need of mankind. How many doctors are confronted by all the mental anguish and sense of need often associated with physical pain. Luke describes a Saviour who reached out to all men. In the three well known parables told by the Lord, their simplicity unfolds the greatness of God’s love. The whole of the Godhead, Son, Spirit and Father, are, I believe, portrayed in these parables. In the first one it is the Lord Himself as the Good Shepherd giving Himself for one lost sheep. The loss represented only 1% of the flock but the Shepherd’s value of it led Him to search until He

found it. Just as the Lord, went to the cross to save every one of us. The story involves the whole of the strength of the Shepherd when He carries the lost sheep on His shoulders and it ends with the joy heaven experiences when just one sinner repents. In the second parable it is a woman searching for a lost coin, part of a set of ten. In this story, 10% of the value of the coins is lost. The woman is, I think, a remarkable picture of the work of the Spirit of God searching through the light of the Word of God to find men and women, all valuable to God. Silver in the Old Testament is often a picture of redemption.

Finally, a son is lost. The value rises to half of the Father's children - a great loss. The Lord Jesus describes in the most wonderful way the lost condition of the son, how he repented, returned and discovered a waiting and loving Father who brought him, not as a beggar, but as a dignified son, back into His house. It is God the Father who is pictured in this final parable as One who patiently waits for our return so that He can lavish upon us the wealth of His love. These images appealed by the Spirit of God to Luke's heart to give us a depth of understanding of the power involved in our salvation - a salvation which involved the whole of the Godhead Trinity. Luke teaches us about reconciliation. About the distance between man and God being overcome, at great cost, by the love and grace of God.

In Luke 17, Luke introduces another side to this story. In verses 11 to 19, the ten lepers appeal to the Lord Jesus for help. As a doctor, Luke would have been familiar with this awful disease. It not only destroyed lives but families. Lepers had to be separated. These ten lepers shouted to the Lord from "afar off". Distance is once more the concern of Luke and once more the Saviour overcomes that distance. He tells the lepers what to do and by obeying His word the lepers are healed. But this time Luke introduces the thankfulness of a cleansed leper. Ten were healed but only one returned to give thanks and he was a Samaritan. The Lord seems to express sadness as He observes that ten were healed but only one returned to give thanks and he was a foreigner. Luke shows us that Christ's love for us demands, in the words of the hymn writer, "my soul, my life, my all". It is sadness to the Lord when we demonstrate little thankfulness for what He has done.

These two lessons about the God's salvation and man's response are brought out, not in a parable, but in the remarkable story of Zacchaeus. If you go to Jericho today, which is one of the oldest cities in the world, you will see an old sycamore tree with a notice under it laying claim to being the very tree Zacchaeus climbed. Standing under it and looking up, you can imagine the moment when Jesus stopped and looking up at His short friend said, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house". The rich tax collector with such a need in his heart to see Jesus jumped from the tree to receive the Lord into his house. The distance Zacchaeus was from God was overcome by God coming down to where he was. The Lord of glory placed Himself in a position where He looked up to where Zacchaeus was so that Zacchaeus would come down to receive Him. The result was salvation. "Salvation is come to this house" because Jesus had come to "seek and to save" those who were lost. And there was a response in Zacchaeus' life. All he was and had came under the control of the Lord. He was not only saved for eternity but for time! These themes of reconciliation, response and rejoicing fill Luke's heart. He never stops writing in vivid wonder at God become man, walking and working on earth.

In Luke 23, Luke records the Lord's crucifixion. Once more he uniquely describes, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, aspects of the cross which we would not have otherwise known. The very first and the last statements the Lord made from the cross are told by Luke. The first cry of the Lord Jesus is, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do." Luke brings home to us what is at the very basis of our Christianity - the forgiveness of God. This penetrated the heart of Luke. God's willingness to forgive and more than this, His willingness to pay the price of forgiveness. Christ, as He was nailed to the cross, explains the very reason He was there was so we could know forgiveness.

Luke also records the Lord's last statement: "Father into Your hands I commend My Spirit". The Lord Jesus had come into the world to do God's will. Luke records the birth, boyhood and blessed manhood of Christ. The Son of God living as man on earth for us and sacrificing that life in obedience to the Father. Luke teaches us that the Lord's life was given up to God as a willing sacrifice. Christ suffered the distance of God's judgement so that we could experience His nearness. Luke also teaches that His obedience to the Father is the pattern for our obedience to the Lord.

In the midst of these first and last cries from the cross, there is another story Luke tells - the story of the dying thief. In the Luke 15 we read of the lost sheep being found. It was a parable about the Lord's saving work as the Good Shepherd. Luke now records the very first lost sheep to be found and taken safely into heaven - the dying thief. In the midst of all the darkness and wickedness which surrounded Calvary, the power of Christ's love for us is seen. The crucified criminal has only time to own Christ as Lord and cast himself on Jesus' mercy. He had no time to live and work for the Lord, only time to trust Him. Luke writes those victorious words, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise". Just as the Shepherd carried the lost sheep home, so the Saviour carried the dying thief into Paradise to be with Him forever.

The final unique record Luke gives us of the Lord Jesus is the resurrection story which took place on the road to Emmaus. Emmaus was the very first historical site I visited in Israel. The quiet road is an ideal place for a reflective journey and deep conversation. One of the thoughts which seems to emerge from Luke's writings is his surprise that the Saviour was not more recognised. It is again as a stranger the Lord appears alongside His two sorrowing disciples. Their thoughts centred on the recent events in the Lord's life. The Lord was the very centre of their thoughts yet He was unknown to them as He walked with them and listened to their conversation. The unknown Child born at Bethlehem becomes the unknown risen Saviour walking alongside His two disciples. Luke's theme of God come down as man, at first unknown yet gently and graciously revealing Himself, continues in the resurrection story. The progress of this journey describes how the Lord walks with His disciples, listens to them, explains everything to them, reveals Himself and finally inspires them to service for others.

Luke leaves us with the vision of a resurrected Saviour whose presence with us now is as certain as when He walked as a man on this earth. Now He is present through His Spirit to walk alongside us, sharing in our concerns, listening to our needs. As our Great High Priest, He is "touched by the feeling of our infirmities" - words which Luke, such a good friend, to Paul could have written.

Jesus explained to His disciples what had happened and that the outcome of His suffering was glory. He did this in a journey through the Old Testament Scriptures of "the things concerning Himself". And so today it is the Word of God which the Lord uses to guide, convince and assure us of His presence and blessing. In the end He reveals Himself to His disciples. It was in a common meal as He broke bread that the disciples recognised Him. Some have suggested they saw the nail prints in His hands. However it happened, they recognised Him. Today the Lord reveals Himself to us through His word, through worship and through our work for Him. This should inspire us to serve Him and others more, just as it inspired the two disciples to get up immediately and make a return seven mile journey to their fellow disciples. When they arrive, the Lord appears again to bring His message of peace to their hearts. So we are encouraged to minister Christ to one another and share His message of peace.

At the very end of his Gospel, Luke records how Jesus takes the disciples out as far as Bethany and "lifted up His hands and blessed them". It is touching that Luke who presents the Lord Jesus as the Son of Man, God become Man, gives us this picture of His nail pierced hands uplifted in blessing as He is taken up into heaven. If God had come down as Man, then as Man He was returning to heaven to live for us in the power of an endless life. The disciples worshipped Him and as we this morning have contemplated Luke's wonderful revelation of the Son of Man, perhaps that's what we should do.

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