# Lessons on Luke

## Background on method and approach

There are many ways to read and study the Bible, and people can have different reasons for why they are reading the Bible. In this class our focus will be on understanding the unique message that Luke has created in his book. In the process we will learn many things that will apply to our lives, and we will seek to identify them and to find ways to incorporate them into our daily lives. But our first goal will be to read and observe the meanings that Luke has built into his book. We will try to avoid discussing every opinion we happen to hold about the topics that come up in our reading. Rather we will try to discover how Luke has used this specific combination and arrangement of speeches and stories to teach specific lessons and ideas. In other words, we will focus on Luke’s ideas and not our own. One of the methods we will use is to pay special attention to things that surprise us or that we are tempted to “explain away.” These will often be the very things that God is teaching us, and the things that we may prefer not to learn.

Luke introduces his gospel in the 1st 4 verses. The language of these verses is unlike the rest of the gospel. They are very formal and verbally lofty, and they addres “most excellent Theophilus.” The title “most excellent” and the Greek name imply that Theophilus was a Greek of high social standing. It is possible that he commissioned and funded the research and writing of the book. In this introduction he is signaling to his readers that he is composing a serious literary work that he hopes his readers will take seriously. Greek biographies and histories of this period tend to intersperse speeches among the stories in order to help the reader understand the meaning of the stories. So in Luke, we are not left to our own devices to try to figure out the meaning and lessons of the stories about Jesus. Rather, Luke gives us guideposts in the form of various speeches to help direct our understanding. This is especially true of the first four chapters where we have speeches (with some dialogue) by the angel who appeared to Zechariah (1:13-20), the angel Gabriel to Mary (1:28-37), a short speech by Elizabeth (1:42-45), Mary (1:47-55), Zechariah (1:68-79), the angel to the shepherds (2:10-12), Simeon (2:29-35), John the Baptist (3:7-17), and finally Jesus (4:18-27). We will see that these speeches set the stage for the interpretation of the whole gospel, and we will pay special attention to them.

## Themes in Luke

1. Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel
2. Jesus has inaugurated the Kingdom of God
   1. by His birth
   2. by His teaching & healing
   3. by His death and resurrection
3. Prophecy (both Old Testament and contemporary) is fulfilled
4. The Kingdom of God
   1. invites all people of all nations
   2. turns worldly norms up-side down
   3. values humility and service over status and wealth
5. The Holy Spirit enables the inauguration of the Kingdom and life in the Kingdom
6. Call to righteousness and the demands of discipleship

## Plan

Each meeting will consist of fellowship, prayer and study. Time should be set aside to share prayer needs and to pray for one another, for the church, and for our community.

There are 24 chapters in Luke and we have about 10-12 weeks to read and discuss it. We will therefore cover about 2 chapters each week. We will not go into depth, but will be looking for major themes. The procedure is meant to be simple so that anyone, no matter how well-trained, can fully participate. Our procedure will consist of three steps.

1. I will provide short notes on each section, which should be read to the group to lay the foundation for the lesson. (I may also provide more extensive notes for leaders as time permits.)
2. The assigned chapters will be divided into several shorter readings. We will have different people read each snippet and then restate the story in their own words. No one will be required to read but all will be invited to do so. At this point we are not asking for interpretation but just re-statement. The goal is to focus our minds on what is in the text and to make sure we all agree on what we have read.
3. Once all of the readings have been completed, we will then open up for general discussion. The basic questions will be “What did you notice? What meaning do you think Luke is trying to communicate?”
4. Finally we will ask what difference this makes for our lives and how we will live out the next week.

Lessons

Chapters 1 – 2 – introduction and the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus

Chapters 3-4 – The inauguration of Jesus’ ministry

Chapters 5-6 – The fundamental principles of Jesus’ ministry

Chapters 7-8 – Miracles and faith

Chapters 9-10 – The meaning of discipleship

Chapters 11-12 – conflict, division and rejection

Chapters 13-15 – True discipleship

Chapters 16-17 – warnings about discipleship

Chapters 18:1-19:28  – Entry into Jerusalem

Chapters 19:29-20:47  – Conflicts in the Temple

Chapters 21:1-22:38 – Final discourses

Chapters 22:39-23:49 – The trial and death of the Messiah

Chapter 23:50-24:53 – Burial, Resurrection and Revelation

## Chapters 1-2: The major themes of the gospel are introduced in the first two chapters about the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus

1. Notice the references to the Holy Spirit who fills John the Baptist even before he is born, causes the virgin Mary to conceive, enables both Elizabeth and Zechariah (the parents of John) to prophecy, and “is upon” Simeon, enabling him to prophecy about Jesus as well.
2. In the first speech of the gospel, the speech of the angel to Zechariah, the angel references Malachi 4:5-6, the very last words of the Hebrew Bible. But he substitutes “the disobedient to the wisdom of the just” for “the hearts of children to their fathers. This is the first hint of Luke’s emphasis on justice and shows that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises to Israel.
3. Mary’s “speech” (actually a song or poem) firmly establishes the theme of humility and reversal. Mary declares that God brings down the mighty and exalts the lowly, just as God has exalted the lowly girl, Mary. This is in fulfilment of God’s promises to Abraham.
4. Zechariah’s prophecy confirms the themes introduced so far and emphasizes the concept of Jesus as King. John’s mission is to prepare the way for Jesus to deliver His people as Davidic King. He also references the covenant with Abraham and says that God will fulfill his oath to Abraham by granting his people the freedom to serve him in holiness and righteousness. This was the vision of all the prophets – that God’s people would no longer worship God in hypocrisy, but in personal holiness and interpersonal righteousness (justice). Jesus has inaugurated a new age of pure worship and justice. Deliverance has finally come in the form of the forgiveness of sins (vs. 77), not political victory over foreign armies.
5. The circumstances of Jesus’ birth point to his calling to be king for God’s people, that His kingdom would show mercy to the poor and humble and would overturn the social order. The circumstances of God’s chosen king were about as humble as you can get.
6. The announcement of the angel to the shepherds makes Jesus’ humble birth “a sign.”
7. Simeon (“the Holy Spirit was upon him”) is the first in the gospel to announce that Jesus’ salvation is for all peoples, not just Israel. He also foreshadows the opposition that Jesus wil experience among His people Israel.