

Lessons From the People of the Bible

Luke

The Doctor who examined the evidence

Lesson 1 – Luke: Cross-examined the eye-witnesses

Reading: Luke 1:1-4

I love reading Luke's accounts of the life of Christ and what we recognise as the beginning of the Church of Jesus Christ. Whilst there are many historical events that are only mentioned in Luke's account, he states categorically at the outset that what he has recorded is the truth, provided to him by the subjects or other eye-witnesses. The fact that he was a physician, a doctor, gives greater credence to his evidence.

We also understand that Dr Luke was a Gentile, not a Jew. He appeared to have come from Antioch, Syria and probably wrote his account for the benefit of other educated Greeks. He was conscious that his writings would be examined closely and consequently was at pains to provide reliable and authenticated proof of his facts.

He would have been the only Gentile author of New Testament writing. As such, he could have been forgiven for being sceptical about the claims by the Jews that their Messiah had arrived. That he should become such a vehement supporter of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ suggests that, for Luke, the evidence was overwhelming.

The fact that Luke was a doctor is also evidenced by the many specific references to medical terms and descriptions. The first of which is that Elizabeth was barren, became pregnant and her son, John, was born. That was closely followed by Mary, the virgin, giving birth to the baby Jesus, whom Dr Luke attested was conceived, not by Mary's human fiancé, Joseph, but through the miraculous intervention of God's Holy Spirit.

Whilst we may question whether a fisherman or a tax collector would be the most authoritative source to confirm that a young virgin brought forth a baby through the conception of the Holy Spirit, we can, however, be fully satisfied when a qualified doctor affirms it. Dr Luke provides evidence from a medical perspective and follows this up by putting it all within a finite historical period.

As with the other Gospel writers, Dr Luke recounts the events as they happened, including the good, the bad and the ugly. What does shine through his version, however, is the description of One who is the perfect Man. The Man Christ Jesus, unlike us, in that He was perfect whereas we are born with what is sometimes called the sin virus.

Jesus was holy. He was not contaminated by the Fall of Adam and Eve as we are. Because He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, His heritage is perfect. However, in order to redeem us, He came to earth in human form, born of a virgin, called Mary, and died in our place to set us free from our selfishness and sin.

Dr Luke examined the evidence and reproduced it for us to read, study and accept. Yes, it is still up to us whether to believe it or not, but Dr Luke has done the research and produced some of the evidence for us.

I am so glad that Christianity is based upon fact, not fiction; upon truth, not myth, and upon

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evidence, not emotionalism or utopian dreams. Dr Luke was not hood-winked; he sifted the evidence and presented his verdict.

It is now up to us what we do with that evidence.

Luke would say to us today...

You can trust the evidence, I did my research thoroughly.

Prayer

Father, I thank You that my faith is not based solely on my emotions, or a desire for the best – it is actually based upon irrefutable historical evidence and an intimate relationship with You. Amen.

Additional readings

- 1 John 1:1-3
- 2 Peter 1:12-21
- 2 Timothy 3:10-17

Questions

1. Why is it important that we examine the historical facts of our faith?
2. Which facts regarding Christianity have the greatest influence on your life?
3. How do the facts of Christianity impact on your willingness to share your faith with your neighbours and work colleagues?

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Lesson 2 – Luke: Realised Elizabeth’s son, John, ushered in a new era of the Holy Spirit

Reading: Luke 1:5-17

The Promise of the Father, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, had been prophesied centuries before. However, everything appeared to have gone quiet. Whilst the hope was kept alive, with the passing of time, the anticipation and expectation were engulfed by reality and normalcy.

Life for the Jews had succumbed to the historical repetition of subservience and oppression. Messiahs and saviours had come and gone; however, nothing had radically changed. The time was ripe for something new but where it would come from was anyone’s guess.

Into this fog of despair and drudgery, Luke realised a shaft of light had broken forth.

Interestingly enough, it happened in the Temple. A priest named Zechariah was going about his priestly duties when he was suddenly confronted by the angel, Gabriel. Understandably, Zechariah was petrified. He was going through the predictable motions of his ministry, not expecting any unusual events to disturb his reverie, when he was startled by this visit. It seems that whenever we read of angels in the Bible, usually two qualities stand out – one is brilliance and the other is size.

Zechariah realised at once that he was in the presence of someone who was out of this world. No doubt he was also taken off guard by the revelation from the angel that he knew, not only the details of Zechariah and Elizabeth’s prayers but, worst still, that they were childless and barren. Gabriel was also aware that it was causing them embarrassment and heartache.

Gabriel’s message was that God was to intervene and fix the problem, so that they would conceive and have a son. However, Gabriel went on to be very specific, saying Zechariah was to name his son, John. Gabriel then prophesied that John would be a very special person, with a very special role and, in order to fulfil that role, would be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from birth.

Luke recognised the significance of that empowering. He must have traced it back and realised that this was the first reference to anyone having been anointed by the Holy Spirit since the days of the Torah. This must have been very significant to Dr Luke since he develops the theme of his text from the testimony of his eye-witnesses.

First there was John, then we read Gabriel visited Mary, Elizabeth’s relative, and prophesied that she would be empowered by the Holy Spirit so that, even as a virgin, she would give birth to God’s Messiah. Luke then turned his attention to Elizabeth, as we find she was filled with the Holy Spirit when Mary visited her. Later Zechariah, who had been made mute by the angel because of his lack of faith, once John was born, not only had his voice restored, but was also filled with the Holy Spirit so he could prophesy.

Luke continued to seek for more evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence in the lives of other people. Dr Luke discovered that when Jesus was taken to the Temple for circumcision and dedication, two more people were filled with the Holy Spirit.

First, he found that a devout Jew, named Simeon, was filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had told Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the coming Messiah with his own eyes. Luke tells us that, prompted by the Holy Spirit, Simeon entered the Temple just as Mary and Joseph were there for the ceremony. Immediately realising that Jesus was the Messiah the Holy

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Spirit was referring to, Simeon took the Baby in his arms and prophesied over Him. Mary never forgot Simeon's words.

Obviously, Mary never forgot the 84-year old widow and prophetess, Anna, either. Nor the fact that she was also filled with the Holy Spirit and had said some amazing things about her child that only God would know.

Yes, Luke recognised that a new era had been ushered in. John's birth was the entrance point and it all tied in with who Jesus really was.

Luke would say to us today...

Joel predicted the outpouring of the Holy Spirit; however, little is recorded until the birth of John when the public demonstration of the Holy Spirit's power became more obvious.

Prayer

Father, John's role was so significant – to prepare the way for the Lord – that he needed to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Our job is no less significant as we point people to Your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Please fill us with Your Holy Spirit so we can be as effective as John was. Amen.

Additional readings

- Luke 1:26-37
- Luke 1:67-79
- Luke 2:21-35

Questions

1. Luke records the Holy Spirit empowering specific people at specific times – where else in Scripture do we see this?
2. Why was it important that those in close family relationship with John were also filled with the Holy Spirit?
3. What was the significance of John's ministry?

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Lesson 3 – Luke: Understood the evidence of The Holy Trinity

Reading: Luke 3:15-22

Once Dr Luke had covered the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, he returned to the role of John. He had obviously been tremendously impacted by what Zechariah and Elizabeth had told him. Particularly the fact that John had been filled with the Holy Spirit from birth in order to fulfil a very significant and radical ministry.

Dr Luke places the time of John's ministry within a well-defined period of history, thus eliminating the opportunity to reduce the facts to mere myth or human fiction. Not only that, but Luke also reminds us, his readers, that John's role had an equally historical basis.

John's message was birthed in the ancient Scriptures. Isaiah had prophesied the coming of someone who would be the forerunner to the promised Messiah, whose role was to prepare the people for a coming Saviour. The inference was that the Saviour would not just be for the Jews but for the whole of the human race.

Luke recognised the fact that some of the people were confused by John's message and behaviour. John had such a public and prominent profile that they thought that he was the promised Messiah. Luke took great pains to ensure that his readers did not share the people's confusion. He recorded John's specific rebuttal, which confirmed the fact that John expected the Messiah to appear after him, and that the Messiah, by inference, was God, whereas John was merely human.

Dr Luke records John's description of Jesus for us. John pointed out that whilst everyone knew that John baptised people in water, for repentance, the One who was still to come, Jesus, would baptise the people with the Holy Spirit. Luke concludes his section on John's message by recording that John was thrown in prison by Herod for denouncing Herod's adulterous relationship with Herodias, his sister-in-law.

Luke then turns his attention, and ours, once more towards Jesus. He traces Jesus' earthly heritage from Adam right down to Joseph, whilst alluding to the fact that Jesus was not actually Joseph's son, since Jesus was born during the time Mary was still a virgin.

When Luke describes the time when Jesus was baptised in water, he records that Jesus was baptised amongst others who were being baptised at the same time. In other words, it was not an isolated and private event, conducted in secret. Many people would have witnessed the event.

What Dr Luke then goes on to describe, however, separates Jesus' baptism from all the others. It was distinct, unique and a never-to-be-forgotten event. Yes, many people had been baptised in water but none of them experienced what Jesus did.

Matthew records that John didn't want to baptise Jesus because he recognised that Jesus was sinless and had nothing to repent of or for. However, Jesus persuaded John to carry it out.

Both Matthew and Luke recorded the significant events that immediately followed Jesus' baptism. First of all, there was the vision of Heaven opening, next the Holy Spirit alighted and rested upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and that was followed by a sound like a voice from Heaven which exclaimed, "*You are My Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased.*"

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Please notice the evidence Luke recorded for us. Jesus, the Son, was baptised in water; the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove and rested and remained with Jesus; the voice of the Father was heard in His proclamation of the revelation of His one and only precious Son.

Luke would say to us today...

When Jesus was baptised the evidence of the reality of the Trinity was revealed.

Prayer

Father, the concept of a 3-in-1 God is difficult for our finite minds to grasp. Please help us look at the evidence and leave the mystery to You. Amen.

Additional readings

- John 16:5-15
- 1 John 4:1-15
- Ephesians 1:3-14

Questions

1. Why is the concept of a Triune God difficult for us to grasp?
2. How can we explain that the Son is as old as the Father?
3. Who is it that lives in us once we become a Christian?

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Lesson 4 – Luke: Described how Jesus won the battle in the desert

Reading: Luke 4:1-21

When Dr Luke recorded in his book the temptations of Jesus used by Satan in the desert, there appear to be some supporting indispensable bookends. Luke began by stating quite categorically, and I quote, *“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days He was tempted by the devil.”* So Luke established that Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit when He entered the desert and whilst He was tempted by the devil.

Luke concluded this episode saying, and again I quote, *“Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit.”* Luke emphasised that Jesus was at all times filled with the Spirit and moved in the power of the Spirit.

Which raises an interesting question – if this is true, why is it that some people use the analogy of a ‘wilderness or desert’ experience as a time when they feel they are on their own, abandoned by God, or at least struggle to feel the presence of God when going through a particularly hard time? I must admit I prefer the opinion expressed by the songwriter who wrote – *if you feel away from Jesus, guess who moved?*

In saying this, I am not in any way trying to diminish the agony of any particular situation people face, nor am I suggesting that there have not been times when I have felt abandoned by God. What I am trying to establish is that, whilst I may feel very alone, misunderstood or even ignored by the Lord, nowhere in Scripture is that condition modelled or envisioned. On the contrary, the writer to the Hebrews wrote, *“God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’”*

Certainly, at times David felt abandoned particularly when hunted by Saul, and Jesus cried out on our behalf – *“My God, My God why have You forsaken Me?”* However, I would suggest that God had not left Jesus alone. The Spirit was with Jesus in the desert, as we have already established, and He was present to support and revive Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Even at Calvary, we sense the Father looking with pride upon His Son as He paid the final sacrifice for our sin and rebellion.

Consequently, we need to remember that our salvation, the assurance that we are the Children of God and that God is with us continually through the ever-present indwelling of the Holy Spirit, is based upon Biblical fact, and not upon our emotions.

What then were the temptations that Satan used on Jesus? Satan knew that Jesus was God incarnate. Satan believed that in order to overcome and defeat Jesus, because Jesus was fully man as well as fully God, he would have to attack Jesus at His point of apparent weakness – His humanity. Satan, undoubtedly, thought that Jesus would be most vulnerable at the end of His forty-day fast and so timed his attack accordingly.

Satan’s first assault was through self-gratification and materialism. Thinking Jesus must be extremely hungry, Satan tempted Him with the concept of changing the stones into bread. After all, the stones did very closely resemble bread anyway. However, the issue was – make Jesus respond like every other human being; let Him misuse His God-given status for personal and temporary benefit. No-one was looking; He was hungry and desperate for something to eat immediately – so what was the problem?

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Jesus countered that eternal life did not depend on temporary physical satisfaction.

Secondly, Satan used the temptation of power. Satan realised that, though Jesus was God, He had laid aside His majesty and become a man, and so Satan sought to establish his power over Jesus. However, there was a flaw to Satan's thinking. He thought power meant authority. But, as the centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant knew, power is governed by authority. The Romans had one level of authority whereas Jesus' power was issued from the Highest Authority. Consequently, power comes from obedience to the governing authority. Jesus chose the Father's, rather than Satan's.

Thirdly, Satan suggested Jesus should use magical gimmicks. He recommended that all Jesus had to do was to pull a stunt and everyone would immediately realise that He was different and hail Him their leader. Jesus, on the other hand, knew that He had come to seek and save the lost, not play tricks on people and thereby lose all His integrity.

What I find extraordinary is that Satan quoted Psalm 91: 11 – 12. I wonder if he felt good until he got to verse 12, when he suddenly realised he had to stop there. You see, verse 13 reminded Jesus that He had total authority to trample on the serpent!

Luke would say to us today...

Please remember that when you go through a desert experience – a battle with Satan – God doesn't leave you. Moreover, Jesus has already won the victory in the war over Satan, sin and death.

Prayer

Father, thank You so much that You have promised never to leave us nor forsake us. Only Jesus had to endure that so we would never have to. Amen

Additional readings

- Isaiah 43:1-13
- Psalm 23
- 2 Corinthians 11:22-33 and 12:9-10

Questions

1. How do we get to know God's presence when we are in the heat of a battle?
2. What are the temptations the enemy will use to attack you?
3. How do we resist the enemy?

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Lesson 5 – Luke: Recognised where all authority comes from

Reading: Luke 7:1-10

Although Jesus' home-town was Nazareth, the Gospel writers record that Jesus spent most of His time in Galilee. He was based in the lakeside town of Capernaum and, undoubtedly, some of that time He stayed in the home of Peter's mother-in-law.

Palestine was occupied by the Romans who had a garrison located in Capernaum. There was no love lost between the two opposing cultures. The Jews were longing for the day when a Messiah would come and deliver them from their oppressors. Many messiahs had come and gone, some with limited success; however, the Romans were still the dominant force and had successfully and brutally crushed all potential insurrection.

The Jews hated the Romans for two main reasons. Not only were they a cruel and unwelcome enemy regime, they were also Gentiles. That meant their cultures would clash over what they ate and how they thought. The biggest problem, however, was that the Jews saw the Romans as spiritually pagan and beyond social intercourse – forsaken by them and God.

Jesus seemed to have a different world-view. He appeared to treat the Romans in much the same way as everyone else. Everyone else, that is, except the religious leaders with whom Jesus seemed to be constantly at odds. Jesus treated the religious leaders as if they should have known the ways of His Father God better and should have been teaching the people righteousness and mercy, rather than legalism and bigotry.

Luke's account of the Roman Centurion's visit to Jesus is very profound. Firstly, we find an outsider, a Roman, a Gentile, approaching the Jews' Messiah. It must have taken both courage and humility. Courage to overcome the potential threats and mocking of the Jews and his fellow Romans, together with the inherent potential of rejection and humility, in that he, a Roman Centurion, was approaching an itinerate and poor Jew for help. However, none of those challenges would prevent the Centurion from seeking Jesus.

Secondly, the reason for his visit was totally unselfish. The Centurion did not approach Jesus for his own benefit, as an ego trip or some status symbol. His motives were far from selfish. No, he approached Jesus on behalf of someone else.

Not a fellow centurion, nor even one of his officers. Not even one of his privates. This man approached Jesus on behalf of one of his servants – the lowest of the low.

I guess that was one of the reasons why Jesus was filled with compassion towards him.

What followed was so amazing even Jesus was astonished. Jesus was the one who went about astonishing others; here the roles were reversed. So what was so remarkable for Jesus? The Centurion's level of faith.

The Centurion sought Jesus out so that He could heal his sick servant. He went on to explain that a Roman Centurion was held in high office because of his rank and the fact that Rome was the world's most powerful nation meant that any orders he made would be obeyed without question. However, he did not have any authority over sickness – that was beyond even his mandate.

Thus he came to Jesus. He recognised that just as he was under the authority of Rome with all its impressive powers, Jesus was under a far greater authority, the authority of God, with supernatural

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and unlimited powers. He expected Jesus to command the sickness to depart and total health to replace it without question.

Jesus was so excited. Here, at last, was someone who recognised that Jesus' miraculous deeds did not emanate from human power but from divine authority and were available for all. However, the most astonishing aspect was that it wasn't a Jew who understood this, but a Gentile. Yes, the faith of the Centurion was justified, as his servant was healed at that very moment.

Luke would say to us today...

Many people seek power; however, success comes through recognising real authority, and serving under that authority. Jesus has it all and His power is available to all, including you.

Prayer

Father, please grant me the faith to believe like the Centurion. To recognise that Jesus is God, and that He has the power and authority to heal today, just as He did then. Amen.

Additional readings

- Psalm 91:1-16
- Job 38:4-18
- Revelation 1:4-18

Questions

1. Why do we struggle with believing Jesus has the power to heal today?
2. What is the difference between power and authority?
3. What does it mean to be 'under' authority?

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Lesson 6 – Luke: Shows us the power of forgiveness

Reading: Luke 7:36-50

Luke records this event for us so that we may learn some very valuable lessons. It begins with a Pharisee, called Simon, inviting Jesus to his house. However, it becomes abundantly clear, very early on, that the invitation was not given out of a heart of love or compassion, nor even friendship but, rather, from a scheming, egocentric, religious leader. It appears Simon was more interested in being able to boast about the fact that he had succeeded in having Jesus come to his house rather than wanting to begin and establish an ongoing relationship.

Such was his indifference to a friendship being formed that he failed to make any attempt to welcome Jesus or treat him as a guest. Simon ignored the propriety of the day, due, one suspects, to a very inadequate view of who Jesus really was. It appears he felt Jesus was beneath him in status.

Indeed, Simon's treatment of Jesus suggests that he considered Him almost an outcast. A poor, itinerant rabbi with no means of support and of little consequence. Oh yes, Simon would have Jesus invited, just to show how beneficent he was but the invitation did not include warmth, graciousness or acceptance. Simon would have Jesus come, so he would be able to hold his head high and announce, to anyone who wanted to know, that he had entertained the Messiah to dinner. That should, at least, boost his ego and, hopefully, his popularity amongst his peers.

Simon set himself up as the centre of interest and praise for the evening, only to be eclipsed by a social outcast, a prostitute. I find it interesting that Luke mentions Simon's name but not hers. Simon undoubtedly wanted Jesus and everyone else to recognise him and all he had done to bring this meeting together. The girl, on the other hand, was only interested in one thing – adoring the One who had forgiven her. She desired neither recognition nor praise. She was totally absorbed in her Master. Jesus was her focus and she expected everyone else to be equally fascinated.

Jesus seized the moment to teach Simon, the rest of His hearers and through Luke's writings, us as well, a valuable and significant spiritual lesson. Jesus had spiritually discerned that Simon was both mocking and arrogantly dismissing Jesus as a fraud. Simon was thinking to himself that Jesus couldn't be much of a prophet if He hadn't realised that the person showering Him with all her devotion was none other than the well-known and well-used town prostitute – the butt of everyone's jokes and the well-used 'toy' for their uncontrolled, sexual passion.

It would appear from the record that Jesus had in fact met her prior to this occasion, in a more private setting, and led her to the point of total forgiveness. In response to that, she had come to thank and worship Him, not to gain His favours. Simon had completely miss-read her actions and continued to condemn and despise her.

Jesus used this poignant moment to cause Simon to have a time of reflection and self-examination. Jesus began by highlighting the contrast between Simon's welcome and hers. Jesus drew attention to Simon's lack of courtesy by comparing it with the girl's personal involvement. Simon did not extend to Jesus even the mandatory minimum honour afforded to the lowest guest – that of washing His feet. By contrast, the girl used her tears to wash His feet and wiped them with her hair.

Simon did not kiss his guest but the girl kissed His feet. Simon did not anoint his guest with oil, but she anointed Jesus' feet with perfume. Oh yes, Simon thought he had everything together and sat

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in judgement of both Jesus and the girl, and yet Simon was the one who was weighed in the balances and found wanting.

Jesus reminded Simon that we all need forgiveness and should never cease to show our gratitude as a result. If we had any real comprehension of what Jesus endured so that we might be forgiven, set free from the past and brought back into a relationship with God as Father, we would be the most excited, thankful and praising people imaginable. Our joy and gratitude would never wear off.

Luke would say to us today...

Love is related to forgiveness. It is very difficult to forgive others until you have experienced the love of God and His forgiveness for yourself. Once you have, you will never ever forget it, and please, never cease to be thankful.

Prayer

Father, Your love for me is beyond compare – it is also beyond description. Please accept my sincere and grateful thanks for all Your mercy, forgiveness and grace. May I never forget or become complacent towards Your great love for me. In Jesus' Name, I ask it. Amen.

Additional readings

- Psalm 103
- Isaiah 53:1-6
- 1 John 1:1-10

Questions

1. Why is it hard to express gratitude to God?
2. Why is it so important to have a gratitude attitude?
3. What can we do to maintain our gratitude to God?

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Lesson 7 – Luke: Differentiates between the exciting and the important

Reading: Luke 10:1-24

Jesus came to earth to usher in the Kingdom of God. He preached the truth, the Good News; He healed the sick and cast out demons. He not only talked about it and taught about it, He did it. More than that, He taught His disciples to do the same.

In the previous chapter He instructed His twelve disciples and empowered them to go out and extend His Kingdom. They took no money with them as they could expect the people they visited to provide for them.

In our reading for this week, we find that Jesus sent out another seventy-two followers. Again, they were to take no money with them; however, they were expected to preach the Kingdom of God, heal the sick and drive out demons.

These disciples were overwhelmed by the experience. When they returned to Jesus to report back on their experiences, they specifically highlighted their success in dealing with demons. They had found that, using Jesus' name, they had complete authority over demons. For the disciples that was completely mind-blowing.

However, Jesus was quick to point out that He was in Heaven when Satan was thrown out. Satan's power was always far inferior to that of Jesus, in that Satan's power was just the usurped power of a created being, whereas Jesus' authority flows from His awesome, holy, righteous, divine and almighty character. As Jesus is God, He has ultimate authority.

Consequently, the authority Jesus delegates to His disciples is far superior to that of Satan and his minions, his demons. Demons have to flee before the Almighty Name of Jesus. Jesus' disciples found that to be true and so can we.

I find Jesus' response to the seventy-two disciples very profound. His reply seems completely unemotional and purely factual – *“I saw Satan fall like lightning from Heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy.”* In other words – *“What did you expect? Have you forgotten that I am God? Satan may be the enemy, and maybe he does appear to be all powerful and certainly stronger than human beings, but you need to remember that Satan is just a created being. I am God, the Creator. There is no greater Name, Authority or Power than Jesus. What you have experienced is totally normal, nothing extraordinary, just the true reality!”*

Nevertheless, as Luke points out, Jesus adds something else that is even more profound – *“However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in Heaven.”* In other words – *“Don't misunderstand the truth. Yes, demons must flee in My Name and that may seem very dramatic for you. However, the most important issue is not to rejoice in the miraculous power and authority of God over sickness and the occult, but that your name is written in Heaven. Don't go for signs and wonders so much as for people's lives to be transformed by the grace of God. The greatest miracle is experienced when someone submits their life to the authority of Jesus Christ – when they admit that they are selfish and rebellious against God, and that they have made a mess of their lives. When they repent of all that they have done wrong and humbly seek God for forgiveness, and surrender their life to the will of God. They become a child of God and their name is written in the Book of Life in Heaven.”*

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It has nothing to do with our importance, significance, wealth, goodness or otherwise. It is all to do with God's grace, and His grace alone. We have no right to enter Heaven. Jesus died to pay the price for us to enjoy a relationship with God as Father. All we have to do is to ask God for His forgiveness and accept the sacrifice Jesus made for us. Once our name is written in Heaven, the whole of Heaven rejoices.

Yes, healing miracles are great; deliverance is terrific. However, never forget, salvation changes the eternal destiny of the human soul. God longs for us to have an eternal relationship with Him, not to just experience a temporary benefit, however exhilarating it might be.

Luke would say to us today...

The greatest miracle is a transformed life through the power of God. The most important relationship you can have is the one with God.

Prayer

Father, I thank You that You are a God of miracles. I thank You that Your power to perform miracles is the same today as it has always been. Please increase my faith to believe for You to work Your miracles through me. Above all, please help me realise that the greatest miracle of all is when someone surrenders their life to You. Amen.

Additional readings

- Luke 15:1-10
- John 3:14-18
- 2 Corinthians 5:14-21
- Galatians 6:14-15

Questions

1. Why is salvation the most spectacular miracle of all?
2. Why are we tempted to concentrate more on physical miracles?
3. Write down a list of ten miracles you have personally witnessed. What effect have they had on your Christian life and witness?

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Lesson 8 – Luke: Recognised that Jesus didn't compromise the Gospel

Reading: Luke 18:18-30

How often people think that being a Christian is all about doing good works. They feel that if they obey the Ten commandments (yet no human ever has), then God will accept them and let them enter the Biblical Heaven, where nearly everyone seems to hope they will end up in. Some people even suggest that if they attend church, read their Bible and pray everyday, then that secures their ticket to Heaven.

Yet, nowhere does the Bible suggest that is true. Indeed, Luke and the other Gospel writers, who recorded what Jesus actually said, seemed to go out of their way to explain that the assumption was far from the truth.

This record of the ruler, who came to Jesus expressly to find out how he could inherit eternal life, beautifully illustrates the point. He opened his conversation by calling Jesus, "Good". This, by inference, suggests that the ruler thought Jesus was more than just a man, more than a guru or Rabbi; someone who could give him real direction. Jesus picked up on the word and reminded the ruler that only God is truly good. However, rather than getting into a discussion over that point, He accepted the reference to His divinity and continued with the dialogue.

Jesus quoted the seventh, sixth, eighth, ninth and fifth Commandments to the ruler, who seemed almost to write them off with disdain, replying that he had obeyed them all from his youth – thereby implying that even having done all that, he still felt unjustified, unfulfilled and empty.

Interestingly, Jesus didn't argue over whether the ruler had obeyed them from his youth or not; Jesus simply replied, "*You still lack one thing. Sell all you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in Heaven. Then come, follow Me.*"

The ruler's response was to go away very sad. He was rich, and his wealth was not only his significance but also his security. He, no doubt, wrestled with Jesus' response from time to time. However, he was able to justify his stance and reject Jesus' advice and solution. Sadly, nowhere in Scripture do we read that he returned to follow Jesus.

The ruler heard the terms for receiving eternal life and rejected them, and Jesus let him go. Please notice that: Jesus let him go. Jesus did not see the ruler's response and say to Himself, "*Oh dear, I didn't think he would take it that hard. He must have known I didn't mean for him to give everything away. I better chase after him and negotiate a win-win situation. I need people like him in My Kingdom – especially some rich ones.*"

No, Jesus let the ruler leave. He neither chased after him nor compromised His reply. Jesus didn't change the rules to satisfy the desires of the ruler. Jesus didn't panic because He saw another person fail to follow Him. He just carried on His journey, preaching the Kingdom of God.

I am so grateful that Luke recorded that event. I have been running the Alpha Courses now for over ten years. On every course, some people come and, after a week or two, decide it is not for them. We have a policy never to chase the people who leave. It's based upon this example.

Our job is to present the truth of the Gospel and allow people the respect and time to make their own decision regarding Jesus Christ. Yes, of course, I feel wounded and rejected every time

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someone chooses not to complete the course, since I know the wonderful transformation Jesus Christ can make to a person's life. However, I have to follow Jesus' example and allow our guests to make up their own minds.

I remember some people who came on an Alpha course many years ago. They attended up until the weekend away, when we look at the teaching on the Holy Spirit. They decided to leave the course before that weekend. I was devastated. However, I am thrilled to be able to report that they came back five years later, attended the weekend away, surrendered their lives to Christ, were filled with the Holy Spirit, had their lives totally transformed and became significant leaders in their local church.

We gave them space, to reflect and make their own decision to follow Jesus, in their own time, without compromising or changing the message.

Luke would say to us today...

We do have to make the Good News relevant to our hearers; however, we must never compromise its demands.

Prayer

Father, in a world that has a warped view of who You really are, please help me to bring truth, reality and freedom, without licence, compromise and misrepresentation. Amen.

Additional readings

- Luke 14:25-35
- Matthew 7:15-23
- Deuteronomy 28:1-29

Questions

1. What are the non-negotiable demands of the Gospel?
2. In what ways are we liable to compromise the Gospel?
3. Why is there often an under-representation of men in the local church in New Zealand today?

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Lesson 9 – Luke: Reminds us of Jesus' mission on earth

Reading: Luke 19:1-10

Tax collectors were even less popular in Jesus' day than they are today. Today they seem to be the butt of jokes; however, in Jesus' time they were even more sinister.

Yes, they were appointed to relieve you of your erstwhile disposable income. In Jesus' time, the tax collectors would add a percentage of the tax payable for their own benefit. Not only that but they worked for the Romans, who were the occupying enemy power. The most galling factor was that most of the tax collectors were themselves, Jews, who were therefore seen as collaborators with the enemy.

Consequently, the religious leaders saw them as the scum of the earth and treated them as outcasts. They were unwelcome to their religious services and barred from their festivities and celebratory events. Indeed, the religious leaders would refuse to ever associate themselves with tax collectors.

In this event, which interestingly only Dr Luke records, Jesus was on His way through Jericho. The inference was that Jesus had no plans to stay there overnight; He was just passing through.

However, there was a very wealthy chief tax collector in the town, named Zacchaeus, who for some reason wanted to see Jesus. No doubt he had heard of Jesus' reputation and wanted to verify what he had heard or, at least, see what he looked like, out of simple curiosity.

Zacchaeus had two immediate problems: Jesus was so popular He had drawn a huge following crowd, so to get anywhere near was nigh on impossible; and secondly, Zacchaeus was short (or vertically challenged!). However, you wouldn't get where Zacchaeus was without being resourceful, using your initiative and being very focused. No, Zacchaeus was not going to be put off – he was determined to see Jesus for himself.

Being a social outcast, he would not have been able to push his way to the front, added to which he was probably hoping that he would be able to see Jesus without being seen by Him. So he chose an undignified option. He climbed up a tree hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus.

One of the interesting things I love about Jesus is that He is God and, as such, Creator of the universe. Consequently, if anyone was going to spot Zacchaeus hiding up in a tree it would be Jesus – since He had designed it in the first place and would have noticed the addition of a human being within its branches!

As Jesus drew close to the tree, He stopped and addressed Zacchaeus. Please notice that Jesus addressed him by name. Not *"Hey, you there up in the tree!"* but rather *"Zacchaeus, come down immediately, I must stay at your house today."*

Zacchaeus' response was equally amazing. He apparently got out of the tree at once and welcomed Jesus into his home. The people were not so welcoming. No, they were indignant that Jesus had gone to be a guest of this outcast.

However, the effect on Zacchaeus was life changing. He had found someone who could see past his job, past his ambition, past his wealth, past his past and into his future. Someone who was more concerned with what he could become, rather than what he was. Zacchaeus' response was one of total repentance.

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Unlike the rich ruler, Zacchaeus immediately gave half of his money to the poor and promised to repay anyone he had defrauded. He also addressed Jesus as his 'Lord'. Jesus' response was equally immediate and thrilling. He exclaimed His delight that Zacchaeus had received salvation, since he had shown signs of true repentance.

Jesus then reaffirmed His whole mission in life – *"The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."*

Thank you, Zacchaeus, for helping us remember what Jesus came to do. And if that was Jesus' mission on earth and we are called to follow Him, it must be our mission, too.

Jesus looks at our hearts and longs for us to reach our destiny – the reason we were created in the first place. He knows that we can only truly find fulfilment in our lives when we are totally surrendered to God and His will for us.

Luke would say to us today...

In all the ministry you are involved in, don't forget to make the main thing *the main thing*. Jesus came to seek and save the lost – that should be our mission, too.

Prayer

Father, despite all the busyness of life, please help me remember that the reason we are on earth is to reach out to those who don't know you and make an introduction. Amen.

Additional readings

- Acts 1:22-41
- Acts 8:26-40
- Acts 16:16-34
- 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

Questions

1. How many friends do you have who do not regularly attend church?
2. What are you doing about introducing them to Jesus?
3. Have you considered inviting them to an Alpha course?

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Lesson 10 – Luke: Looked at some of the finer points of the Crucifixion

Reading: Luke 23:32-47

Jesus was not crucified on His own. Had He been, it was possible that His death was seen by some as an act of martyrdom. Having Jesus crucified with men on either side would have enabled the authorities to slip Jesus' innocent death into the schedule of routine executions for common criminals. For them, Jesus would be just one more irritant out of the way.

For the people, Jesus' death was seen as just another human being sentenced for crimes against the state and society. He had been tried and found guilty, like all the rest. The Romans and religious leaders had all found Jesus guilty, so He deserved to die for whatever it was He had done wrong.

The rulers challenged Jesus again to prove that He was the expected Messiah, the Christ of God. However, all Jesus did was to ask the Father to forgive them for what they were doing through their ignorance.

The Roman soldiers added their insults to the crescendo of hate. Seeing the sign above Jesus' head that read He was the King of the Jews, they taunted Jesus to save Himself first before He saved them. That would really show His power was greater than that of Rome and the Jews. The condemned criminals joined in the taunting.

However, it appears that one of them suddenly had a divine revelation. Realising that Jesus had been handed down the same sentence as himself, he compared his life with that of Jesus. As with the dawning of a new day, the criminal saw Jesus in a new light. Yes, he was guilty, but what had Jesus done to deserve death? Nothing!

Something was happening here that was terribly wrong. Yes, he and the other criminal were, in one sense, getting just what they deserved; they had violated the law, got caught, been tried, found guilty and sentenced to death. But there was something about Jesus that blazed forth in truth.

What was Jesus doing here? How come He was being crucified? It didn't make sense. What had Jesus ever done to deserve death? The criminal had no doubt heard the rumours about Jesus; His miracles of healing, His radical teaching, His compassion for the poor, the sick and the outcasts. Hardly what you would expect someone to be crucified for.

No, there must be a mistake. Injustice was taking place. This Jesus was more than a human being. He represented everything that was good, righteous and truthful. The mob must be mistaken. And yet, the paradox was that the only One who could do anything to rectify the situation was allowing it to happen.

However, Jesus didn't give the impression that He was helpless. Neither was He vowing to get even. No, through it all, Jesus was the willing victim, determined to allow the events to reach their inevitable climax.

This criminal had a second look at Jesus. Through his own agony, he saw the Truth. Yes, Jesus was the King of The Jews, and yet, He seemed to be even more – yes, He had to be the Promised Messiah who would die for the sins of the world, including his. Jesus must be going to survive this ordeal and enter a Kingdom far superior to that of Rome. A place of order, righteousness, peace

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and life in all its fullness. Realising this, the criminal cried out for Jesus to remember him once Jesus entered His eternal Kingdom.

Jesus' reply shattered the gloom, defined the future and set this criminal free.

Yes, Jesus' reply brings hope to the hopeless, the outcast and the criminal – me and you. Whilst we have breath in our lungs, it is not too late to repent, ask God to forgive us and become a child of God, with an eternal future with Christ in Heaven.

What stopped the other criminal doing the same as this one? Why would anyone reject the salvation Jesus offers?

Luke would say to us today...

We all need a Saviour. Jesus was crucified between two thieves who both had the same death sentence as Jesus. One suddenly realised that Jesus was innocent and asked Him for salvation. Jesus reassured him that he would join Jesus in Paradise that very day. No-one is exempt from asking Jesus for salvation, and no-one will be denied their salvation, even in the dying moments of their life on earth.

Prayer

Thank You, Father, for being so loving and gracious that even in the final moments of our life You will still respond to a genuine cry for mercy. Nevertheless, please help us remember that it is always better to seek Your forgiveness as early as possible and thereby save ourselves so much pain and anxiety. Amen.

Additional readings

- Isaiah 1:10-20
- Isaiah 55:1-13
- Hebrews 4:7-16

Questions

1. Why do people want to put off becoming a Christian, only surrendering their lives to Christ when they are ready?
2. Can we enter the family of God without being baptised in water?
3. How do you try and persuade people to follow Christ before it is too late?

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Lesson 11 – Luke: Cross-examined the eye-witnesses of the Resurrection (part 1)

Reading: Luke 24:1-12

There are so many questions surrounding the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ that I am glad Dr Luke took the time to examine the evidence in detail.

He needed to cross-examine the eye-witnesses, as there appear to be discrepancies when we compare the different accounts recorded in the Scriptures. For example – who went to the tomb? All four Gospel writers tell us Mary Magdalene was there.

Matthew adds, *“the other Mary”*; Mark records, *“Mary the mother of James, and Salome”*. Luke confirms that *“Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna and the others that were with them”*.

So, although Matthew, Mark and John did not include the names of all those present, this in no way suggests that their records are untrustworthy. It rather suggests that there was definitely no deceitful collusion among them. This is further implied by the other details mentioned in single accounts.

Was there an earthquake as Matthew suggests? Did the women see men or angels?

What we know from the experience of the legal profession is that eye-witnesses' description of events can vary significantly, as a result of undue stress caused by some significant event, the predetermined expectation about the event or just a natural mental filter that one uses to interpret an event.

However, there are certain facts that remain consistent. Mary Magdalene and her friends went to the tomb, about dawn, on the morning of the first day of the week. Their intention was to embalm the body of Jesus. They had witnessed the body being laid in the tomb in the garden owned by Joseph of Arimathea, so they knew where to go in order to perform those last rites.

They were shocked and confused when they eventually arrived, because the heavy stone rock that sealed the entrance of the tomb had already been rolled away. They had wondered who was to remove it before they arrived, only to find the tomb gaping open.

Christians often refer to the empty tomb on Easter Sunday morning, and in one way they are correct, since Jesus' body was no longer in the grave. However, both John and Luke remind us that the tomb wasn't completely empty; Jesus had left behind the linen cloths that His body had been wrapped in. What is more, the head covering was lying separately from the rest of the cloths. It appears that what they saw was a heap of cloths lying in the shape of a body but the body that the cloths had previously wrapped was missing.

That is significant. If, as some suggest, the disciples of Jesus had stolen and hidden his body, why would they go to the lengths of unwrapping Jesus' body and placing the cloths back just as if the body was still there. Not only did the disciples revere Jesus and so would wish to keep his body just as it was, but additionally it would have taken them far too long to unwrap His body, bearing in mind they would be scared stiff that their action would be discovered by the authorities. No, they didn't steal the body.

Similarly, it is most unlikely for Jesus to have somehow miraculously recovered from his fatal

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wounds and then taken the trouble to unwrap the cloths and lie them in such a specific way before exiting the tomb stark naked, let alone be able to remove the stone on his own. No, we know Jesus was dead. The only reason no-one found His body is that Jesus rose from the dead, as He promised.

I love the question, that Luke records, the women were asked, *“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here: He has risen!”* Isn't that fantastic? We don't normally go into the cemetery to look for those who are alive. No, we only go there to pay respect to the dead. Not only were the women brought back to reality – the reality that Jesus was alive – they were also reminded about what Jesus had told them before His death, that He would not only be crucified, but also rise from the dead on the third day.

I'm sure Dr Luke's pulse must have risen dramatically as his interviewees recounted that awesome day and how they had felt. Especially, as he sensed how their message was the most exciting the world had ever received. One can almost see the pen in his hand flowing furiously over the page in order to get the truth down on paper for posterity.

Yes, Luke was convinced from his eye-witnesses' accounts – Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the third day. It was not a figment of the imagination, or just wishful thinking – it was the history breaking, world transforming and undeniable truth.

Jesus Christ is God and alive forever and ever.

Luke would say to us today...

You can take it from me, I examined the evidence of the eye-witnesses and this is what I found to be the truth. It may seem out of this world; however, it happened in this world with the added dimension of eternal significance.

Prayer

Father, how can a mere human being understand the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Your One and Only Son. Yet, we thank You for the evidence, recorded by the eyewitnesses, that enables us to place our faith completely on Your Truth and Your never-ending life. Amen.

Additional readings

- John 20:1-18
- Matthew 28:1-10
- 2 Peter 1:16-21

Questions

1. Why is the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ such a challenge to us?
2. Why are the alternative theories about Jesus' disappearance less than realistic?
3. How does the truth of Christ's resurrection affect your life?

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Lesson 12 – Luke: Cross-examined the eye-witnesses of the Resurrection (part 2)

Reading: Luke 24:13-35

This record is unique to Dr Luke's account and I'm so glad he included it. It highlights something that is very apparent from all the Gospel narratives; the eye-witnesses were totally overwhelmed by the fact of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Although the writers have recorded that, on many occasions, Jesus had warned His disciples that He would be handed over to His enemies, be cruelly crucified and would rise from the dead on the third day, His disciples failed to believe or remember that prophecy and promise.

Yes, they lived through the times of misunderstanding and antagonism, and yet through it all, Jesus gave no hint that He was unprepared for it, that He was being swayed by public opinion or diverted from His predetermined goal. However, suddenly, it seemed as if everything had turned to custard – Jesus was overwhelmed with opposition and the status quo had regained control. The religious leaders and occupying Romans had resumed their firm grip on events and played out their treacherous and deceitful plan.

For Jesus' followers, their hopes and dreams were shattered and, understandably, they forgot those gloom-shattering words of Jesus – that He would conquer death and rise from the dead – so, like many of us, they reverted to their normal way of living and the daily concerns of life. They also allowed their fear to overwhelm them. Fear of being identified as past associates of the crucified Messiah and fear of believing a lie. No wonder they were living with a fortress mentality.

Cleopas and his friend were evidently no different from the rest. They were walking along totally overtaken by their grief. How like Jesus to come alongside people like that! However, Jesus didn't immediately break them out of their reverie or rebuke them for their lack of faith. He just asked them some penetrating questions, which helped them to verbalise their doubts and fears.

I love what Cleopas asked Jesus, *"Are You only a visitor to Jerusalem and don't know the things that have happened there in these days?"* Cleopas was not speaking to a visitor; he was addressing the subject, the focal point of all the action! Not only was Jesus there during the events Cleopas described, He was the reason for the events; He was the divine orchestrator, victim and victor.

Yes, Jesus chided them for their lack of faith to believe what the prophets had said about their Messiah. I'm sure Jesus then proceeded to give Cleopas and his friend the most amazing Bible study anyone on earth ever had the privilege to hear.

However, I want to emphasise the question Jesus asked prior to giving that study. It highlights a misconception that many still struggle with. Did the Christ have to die? Jesus posed the question this way, *"Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory?"* I find that question one of the most exciting questions ever raised.

The prevailing belief at the time was that the Christ would come and set the people of Israel free. Free from the oppression of the occupying forces, the Romans, and free from the legalism of the religious leaders. Watching Jesus' life and hearing His teaching went a long way towards reaffirming their hopes.

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However, had Jesus fulfilled that vision, His glory would have been far too dim. He would have ended merely as a human potentate, with authority limited to earth. On the contrary, His glory was to be far greater. Jesus had ultimate authority and it could only be fully expressed through completing His and His Father's plan. Yes, Jesus had to suffer these things and then enter His glory.

The Bible study that followed must have been riveting and truly awesome, as Jesus revealed Himself in all the Scriptures. How I would have loved to be there. No wonder Cleopas and his friend confessed how their hearts burned as Jesus opened up the Scriptures to them.

Did you notice that after they enjoyed that Bible study and meeting with Jesus, they just had to go and tell others? So should we.

Luke would say to us today...

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is absolutely crucial to our faith, for unless it is true, we are trusting in an illusion, no more than wishful thinking. However, we have a firm foundation for our faith, based on ancient Scriptures and undeniable facts.

Prayer

Thank You, Holy Spirit, for arranging for Dr Luke to record that testimony for us. Please give us the same excitement, to not only study Your Scriptures, but also to share the truth with others, so that they can get to know and experience the living Jesus for themselves. Amen.

Additional readings

- 1 Corinthians 15:1-21
- 2 Timothy 3:10-16
- 1 Peter 1:3-21

Questions

1. Are you able to prove from the Old Testament that Jesus would die and rise again?
2. Do you see Jesus, by faith, whenever you take Communion? If so, how?
3. What was the "glory" Jesus said He would enter?

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Lesson 13 – Luke: Recorded what Jesus said regarding the release of the Holy Spirit

Reading: Acts 1:1-8

If there was ever a pivotal Scripture requiring us to re-examine our life's purpose and aspirations it has to be this.

Dr Luke continued his writings, in his book we call the Acts of the Apostles (although it is probably more accurately referred to as the Acts of the Holy Spirit). Luke moves from the examination of the physical life of Christ Jesus on earth to the examination of the birth of the Church of Jesus Christ and the subsequent work of the Holy Spirit demonstrated through the lives of Jesus' followers, His disciples – now called, "apostles" – and the general members of the congregations.

However, in order to set the scene in its proper context, Luke recalls the last words spoken by Jesus prior to His departure from earth and ascension into Heaven. Luke records that Jesus remained on earth for about six weeks after He rose from the dead. During that time many people saw and interacted with the risen Jesus.

His life after the grave was not strictly temporary – Jesus visited many people in order to verify His resurrection. Indeed, Paul the Apostle tells us that, on one occasion, Jesus was seen by a group of over five hundred. So Jesus' resurrection was not the 'secret' many seem to think it was. Luke considers the evidence of Jesus' resurrection to be infallible, due to many verified encounters.

On to this firm foundation of truth, Dr Luke records that, on one occasion prior to His ascension, Jesus told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they had been baptised with the Holy Spirit. Jesus went on to say that the disciples would receive power after they had been baptised with the Holy Spirit, and as a consequence, they would be witnesses for Jesus, not only in Jerusalem where they were staying, but subsequently throughout all the towns and villages as they fanned out across the land. Indeed, Jesus expected that migration to continue until every nation has been covered with the Good News.

This reaffirms what Matthew and Mark recorded, that Jesus, prior to ascending into Heaven, commanded His disciples to take the Good News to the entire world so everyone on earth could hear it.

What I find particularly challenging is that Jesus expected the disciples to experience difficulty sharing the Good News until they were baptised with the Holy Spirit. Jesus made a definitive point that the disciples would need extra power from on high before they were able to fulfil the Great Commission.

Jesus seemed to be quite adamant that the disciples should not go off on their own to carry the Good News to the other towns and cities until the Holy Spirit had come upon them with power. On the contrary, Jesus commanded them to stay in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came upon them in a new way and with new power, so they would have a new boldness and new courage.

Being with Jesus was not enough. Being a disciple was not enough. Jesus knew that His disciples would encounter opposition and hardship as soon as they started witnessing about all that they had seen and heard. It stands to reason that those who had crucified the Son of God would not be too pleased at finding a twelve-fold increase in people acting like Him and teaching the same things.

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In order for Jesus' plan to be fully functional, His disciples needed the same degree of Holy Spirit anointing that Jesus had, and that would come only after they had been baptised with the Holy Spirit.

If I find it difficult to witness about my faith in Christ, the challenge for me has to be encapsulated in one of two options, either a) I have not received the baptism of the Holy Spirit or b) I am quenching the work of the Holy Spirit in my life.

Therefore, my role as a Christian is to release the Holy Spirit to do His work, thus enabling me to witness to others, about my faith in Christ, my love for Jesus, and to demonstrate the power of God in my life.

Luke would say to us today...

The primary role of the Holy Spirit is to bring people into a mature relationship with Jesus Christ. Consequently, for Christians, the Holy Spirit's role is to help us witness to those who aren't yet believers so they, too, can become followers of Christ.

Prayer

Father, thank You so much for the gift of Your Holy Spirit. Please help me remember that the Spirit has been given to me so that I may witness about You to others. Amen.

Additional readings

- John 15:26-27
- Isaiah 61:1-3
- Matthew 3:11-17
- Acts 10:34-48

Questions

1. Why do we find witnessing difficult?
2. What is the Holy Spirit's role today?
3. What do I need to do to ensure I am not quenching the work of the Holy Spirit in my life?

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Lesson 14 – Luke: Described the Birth of the Christian Church

Reading: Acts 2:1-21

Acts Chapter 2 must be one of the most dramatic and exciting passages of the whole of Scripture. It has been well described as a record of the birth of the Christian Church.

Whilst the disciples had lived with Jesus for three years, experienced the highs and lows of that period and received the presence of the Holy Spirit – thus having been ‘born again’ as Jesus described it – Jesus, nevertheless, told His disciples that something ‘extra’ would happen once they had been baptised by the Holy Spirit.

The disciples were overcome by fear when Jesus was betrayed by Judas. Most of them ran away, and even their spokesman, Peter, ended up vehemently denying that he knew Jesus, let alone claimed he was one of Jesus’ friends.

Even though Jesus had met with them after His resurrection, the disciples remained fearful and aimless. So much so that when Peter suggested he would return to his old occupation of fishing, it seems the rest were just as keen to do the same – since no other ambition inspired their vision.

Before Jesus ascended into Heaven and left them on their own, He gave them strict instructions to stay together and wait in Jerusalem for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It appears the disciples did just that. They returned to their meeting place in Jerusalem and spent the time praying, studying and discussing the Scriptures. It would appear that about one hundred and twenty followers gathered there.

As they were waiting, Peter felt they should choose someone to replace Judas to return the leadership team to twelve. Obviously, the Holy Spirit revealed to them that the vacancy should be filled by Matthias.

The next event Luke recorded for us was the Day of Pentecost, the first day of the week long festival. It would appear that, for the disciples, the day began just as any other day, with fellowship and prayer. However, this day was to change their lives forever, for early in the morning as they were praying, the Holy Spirit arrived.

The disciples remembered three things from that experience: particularly, the noise, sounding like a tropical rain storm; the fire, which separated out and came like a flame to rest over each of their heads, and their speech, which changed to represent one of the languages used by the Jewish visitors who came to Jerusalem for the feast.

The noise of their new languages must have been quite disconcerting for themselves, let alone the folk looking on. However, what became immediately apparent was that the disciples had a new ability to converse with people in a language they had never learnt. Jews, who had come from many nations from where they had been dispersed over the centuries and who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, could now hear these disciples in their own ethnic language.

Initially, the people were amazed and overwhelmed; however, understandably, some sceptics criticised them for being drunk. Peter countered that argument quickly by reminding them that it was far too early in the morning for them to be intoxicated.

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What took place next was the start of a whole new era in Peter's life. Peter changed from being the one who fearfully denied his Messiah to one of the most courageous public champions of the Christian faith. He captivated his audience with an awe-inspiring Bible study and message on how to get right with God. He was even bold enough to describe his hearers as accomplices to the crucifixion of the Christ of God.

Nevertheless, Peter also included the good news that death could not hold Jesus down and that God had raised Jesus from the dead as the Scriptures had described. Not only that, but what the people were witnessing was also in accordance with the Scriptures, the prophecy given by Joel. Joel had prophesied the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all people, and these folk in Jerusalem were the eyewitnesses of the fulfilment of the promise. What an incredible privilege!

At the end of his message Peter invited his hearers to change their ways to become Christ followers. By the end of the day the number of believers had risen from one hundred and twenty to over three thousand. The Holy Spirit had definitely come, and in great power, making it easy for the disciples to witness in a way they had never been able to do before.

Luke would say to us today...

From the Day of Pentecost onwards, the followers of Jesus became world-changers. They, themselves, changed from being fearful secret disciples into dynamic radical revolutionaries. People who brought life, hope, healing and joy to those they met. They fulfilled what Jesus expected; they preached the Good News, healed the sick and released those captivated by the enemy, Satan.

The world changing revolution of love – the Church of Jesus Christ – had been birthed.

Prayer

Father, thank You for sending the Holy Spirit to those early disciples so that Your Church on earth might begin in power and authority. I thank You that the promise of Your Holy Spirit is the same for us today – Your Church continues to grow and the awesome power of Your Holy Spirit is seen throughout the world today. Amen.

Additional readings

- Ezekiel 47:1-12
- Joel 2:28-32
- John 7:37-39

Questions

1. What evidence is there of the Holy Spirit's power in your life?
2. What description of the Day of Pentecost thrills you the most?
3. What is there about the Day of Pentecost that challenges you the most?

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Lesson 15 – Luke: Covered the basics

Reading: Acts 2:37-47

Mercy and truth go together. Good news reaches its climax only when the bad news has been revealed. The Good News of Christianity only becomes relevant when it is placed within the overall context of the plan and character of God.

Unfortunately, many people have an inadequate or inaccurate understanding of the character of the God of the Bible. (Incidentally, I realise that I don't have enough space in this column to fully and totally accurately describe God.) Nevertheless, the God described in the Bible is the Creator of the world and cosmos. He has always existed and is the only Being never to have been created. He has created everything that has been created. His character is eternal, pure, righteous, good and holy. He is both infinite and divine. He is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. The Bible also describes God as light, spirit and truth, and Trinity – Father, Word (Son) and Holy Spirit.

In contrast, we are finite, human and imperfect. Added to that we have a bias towards selfishness and independence. This self-centred attitude and drive for self-preservation invariably cause us to think and act in ways contrary to the will of God, who is also by nature others-centred.

The Bible calls our wilful selfishness and independent rebelliousness sin. There are consequences to that sinful nature and all we do that is wrong – they are separation from God and the sentence of God's wrath. That equates to the bad news.

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter told the people that Jesus of Nazareth was not just a man but the incarnation of God – the Messiah promised in the Holy Scriptures. Peter proceeded to remind them that though they had killed Jesus, however, because Jesus was indeed the promised and righteous Messiah, God raised Him from the dead, as prophesied by the Scriptures. The Jesus they had crucified was indeed God in human form, and God had now exalted Him as Lord and Christ.

Understandably, the people were horror-stricken. They stood condemned and wondered what they could do to extricate themselves from such an appalling position. Peter responded by confirming that they should repent from what they had done wrong and seek God's forgiveness. Peter also instructed them to be baptised in water and that they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Dr Luke goes on to describe how the new believers lived. How they shared their lives together; eating in one another's homes and taking time to study the Scriptures, listening to the teaching of the apostles, praising and praying to God. They enjoyed one another's company so much that, not only did they spend as much time as possible together, they also cared for one another – so much that if anyone lacked anything it would be provided by someone else within the Christian community.

Luke helps us by recording the order. First, Peter presented the bad news. He explained that the people had offended God by crucifying their Messiah. That caused the people to understand their position before a holy God – they were guilty of death – God's wrath was the sentence. Then Peter presented the Good News. The way to be restored to a loving relationship with God – through asking for forgiveness, repenting through a change of lifestyle and by baptism, revealing a new heart of obedience towards God.

Once they had made the change and been filled with the Holy Spirit, their whole lifestyle was transformed, and instead of being selfish they became God focused and others centred. What followed was not only a life of worship towards God and love towards their fellow believers but, as

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Dr Luke adds, amazing miracles followed, and many more people became Christians.

It's the same for us. Until we understand the bad news we will carry on living just the same way as we do already. However, once we learn and understand the bad news, that we are also sinful and under God's sentence of Holy Wrath, we can also accept the Good News, that Jesus died to pay the price for our sins. We can ask Him for His forgiveness and turn from everything we know is wrong. We can be obedient by being baptised in water and ask for the Holy Spirit to fill us.

Then we can experience the same kind of transformation in our lives, which will be out-worked through caring for others and being obedient to God's will for our lives. We can also expect to see God perform miracles through us.

Luke would say to us today...

The Christian life is not about rules and regulations, it's about a heart transplant and a relationship with the Creator God as our loving Heavenly Father. Once we understand the bad news, we can accept the Good News, and we can ask God to forgive us and change us to become more like Jesus.

Prayer

Father, thank You for the Good News of the Gospel. That Jesus died for my sin so that I might come back into a relationship with You, my Creator, as my loving Heavenly Father. Please continue to fill me with Your Holy Spirit so that I may represent You on earth and fulfil the destiny for which You created me. Amen

Additional readings

- Jeremiah 31:30-34
- Isaiah 1:11-20
- John 3:1-21

Questions

1. Why do we need to understand the bad news before the Good News will make sense to us?
2. Why is it so hard to ask God for His forgiveness?
3. Why did Peter emphasise the need to be baptised in water?

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Lessons 16 – Luke: Was impacted by the error of Ananias and Sapphira

Reading Acts 5:1-11

Dr Luke contrasts the generous gift Joseph (Barnabas) brought with the attention and kudos-seeking action of Ananias and Sapphira. Barnabas, Luke tells us, sold a piece of property, a field, brought the proceeds and gave it to the apostles to use for the benefit of others. It was a pure gift, motivated solely by love and to be used for the extension of the Kingdom of God.

This act of kindness was seen and obviously greatly appreciated by all the believers and, especially, the apostles. No doubt Ananias and Sapphira saw and thought it would be a great way for them to be seen equally as benefactors to the church. However, their motives were far from pure. It appears they just wanted to be liked and respected in a similar way to Barnabas, without caring about their deeper motives.

The sad thing is, of course, that Ananias and Sapphira didn't need to sell the land at all. There was no obligation on them to copy Barnabas' actions. They could have remained a part of the church fellowship without selling any of their property. Or they could have told everyone that they were presenting a gift of part of the proceeds and all would have been fine. But no, they decided to contrive a deception.

Ananias and Sapphira sought to over-shadow Barnabas to become the centre of attention. They desired the applause and recognition of the apostles rather than the approval of God. Jesus said that our giving should be between God and us, not something to broadcast before the congregation. *"When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret will reward you."* Matthew 6: 3-4

Ananias brazenly brought the remaining money and laid it at Peter's feet as if nothing was wrong and with the purest of motives and intentions. However, Ananias had overlooked two issues – a) you cannot fool the Holy Spirit; you cannot mock God and get away with it; b) Peter was full of the Holy Spirit and would be given the necessary word of knowledge about the transaction.

Ananias's joy and deception ended abruptly. As soon as he arrived in front of Peter, Peter, speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, challenged Ananias about his actions and deceit. Peter expressly pointed out that Ananias had not only lied before men but, far more significantly, had tried to equally deceive the Holy Spirit of God.

Peter was awe-struck and completely baffled as to why Ananias would contrive and try to execute such a plan. He emphasised to Ananias that the whole transaction was completely and utterly between Ananias, his wife and God. There was no need for any deception. The money was all his to do with as he pleased so why had he gone to such lengths to enrage the Holy Spirit.

Peter had no sooner uttered those words when Ananias fell down as a heap on the floor, totally lifeless. When the people saw what had happened and realised that Ananias was dead they were petrified. The undertakers came in and disposed of Ananias's body.

Meanwhile, Sapphira, knowing nothing about what had happened to her husband, unwittingly arrived at the gathering. Obviously, her intent was to join in the celebration and admiration that Ananias would have been basking in.

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However, before anyone could warn Sapphira or appraise her of what had taken place, Peter asked her to confirm the money they had given was indeed the full selling price. She concurred at once.

Peter was incredulous. How, he challenged her, could she have agreed to test the Holy Spirit in such a way? He then told her to look behind and that the undertakers who had just buried her husband were returning to do the same for her. Sapphira immediately slumped down dead. The undertakers came and carried her out to be buried with her husband.

Luke records, almost unnecessarily, that the whole church was seized with fear.

Was God hard on Ananias and Sapphira? It seems so, from a human standpoint. And yet, I guess God had to establish integrity in the church at the very beginning of its life. I see this record as a salutary warning to me. I must never forget that our (my) God is a Holy God and considers sin and hypocrisy abhorrent. I, therefore, stand in awe of His mercy and grace to me.

Luke would say to us today...

God expects His people to act with the utmost integrity. And never forget that the Holy Spirit is God's one and only policeman who watches over the Church.

Prayer

Father, thank You for arranging for Dr Luke to record this event. Whilst it is difficult for us to understand why You were so severe on Ananias and Sapphira, this record stands as a reminder of Your awesome righteousness and holiness and also Your passion for Your Church to be set apart, solely for You. Please help me never to forget the wonder of Your awesome grace and mercy to me. Amen.

Additional readings

- Numbers 12:1-15
- 2 Samuel 6:1-11
- Ephesians 4:17-32

Questions

1. What do you think was the motive behind Ananias and Sapphira's deception?
2. Why did God deal with this so severely?
3. How do you think Peter felt?

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Lesson 17 – Luke: Introduces Stephen as the first Christian Martyr

Reading: Acts 6:8-15

Whoever said being a Christian was easy has never understood the claims of Christ. Surely that must be one of the most common hindrances that prevents people from accepting Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour and Lord. Saviour maybe; Lord, no thank you.

Jesus Christ remains for many a spiritual paradox. On the one hand, they love the way Jesus went out of His way to love the unloved, the poor and the social outcasts. They love some of what He said and consider His teaching some of the very best in the world. They love His description of Heaven and His acceptance of all humanity, regardless of ethnicity, social status, religious beliefs, financial position or moral standing. They love His rejection of traditional, legalistic and organised religion.

However, they dislike His claim to be God. They dislike His demands to “follow Me”. They dislike His expectation that we should actually live out the moral code He gave us. They dislike the fact that He claimed to be the only Way to God. The only One who could introduce God, the Creator of the world, to us as our Heavenly Father.

Dr Luke found such a follower in Stephen. Stephen was someone who believed that Jesus Christ was, in fact, God Incarnate. Jesus had come to earth to die for the sins of the world (and Stephen’s sins) and to reveal the heart of God to us. Stephen also believed that after Jesus Christ had ascended into Heaven He sent the Holy Spirit upon His followers (including Stephen).

Dr Luke records that through the power of the Holy Spirit, God had performed many miraculous signs and wonders through Stephen. However, the religious authorities didn’t accept what Stephen had to say – how could they when they had arranged for Jesus to be crucified? They put Stephen on trial. However, he was able to confound their inadequate understanding of the Scriptures.

Nevertheless, when Stephen specifically drew their attention to the fact that they had destroyed the Promised Messiah, the Sanhedrin went into uproar. When Stephen cried out that he could see a vision of God in Heaven and Jesus standing at His right hand side, all the power of hell broke loose.

They grabbed Stephen and stoned him to death. They could not allow such a person to co-exist with them. Interestingly enough, Dr Luke records that those who threw the murderous stones laid their garments in the care of one, Saul of Tarsus. What an interesting introduction we have to Saul!

Dr Luke also records Stephen’s final words, asking God to forgive those who were killing him.

I can’t say I have heard many messages based upon Stephen’s life and death, and his martyrdom recently. I guess for those of us in the Western church, martyrdom is a thing of the past. We live in a tolerant society where it is considered inappropriate to be dogmatic about what you believe and, consequently, the Church is seen as either judgmental or irrelevant and impotent.

And yet, I’m told there have been more Christian martyrs in the last 100 years than in the whole of the last 2000 years. Yes, there are people, still, who think Jesus Christ is worthy of following, worthy of standing up for and worthy of dying for. Maybe, if we taught the words Jesus taught and lived out His teaching in the power of the Holy Spirit we would also see miraculous signs and

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wonders, which would show the world that the Church is still alive and well.

On the other hand, we might end up with even more martyrs – what do you think?

Luke would say to us today...

Stephen thought standing up for Jesus Christ as His Lord and Master was worth every breath in his body. We all need to consider whether Jesus means that much to us as well.

Prayer

Father, thank You for reminding us, through Stephen's experience, that even in times of fiercest trial You never leave us nor forsake us. On the contrary, You give us the grace and courage to complete the race You have called us to.

Additional readings

- Acts 7:44-60
- Philippians 3:1-10
- Acts 16:16-34

Questions

1. Why do you think the religious leaders wanted Stephen stoned to death?
2. Why didn't God rescue Stephen, considering He rescued Peter and John, and Paul and Silas?
3. Why do you think Stephen saw a vision of Jesus standing up rather than sitting on the throne?

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Lesson 18 – Luke: Recorded the Gospel being introduced to Africa

Reading: Acts 8:26-40

Dr Luke saw how the prophecy of Jesus was being fulfilled. Luke recorded that, prior to His ascension, Jesus commanded His apostles to stay in Jerusalem until they had received power from Heaven. They had to wait until they had been baptised with the Holy Spirit, after which Jesus told them that they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and throughout the rest of the world.

Luke had already described how the disciples had been baptised with the Holy Spirit whilst they were in prayer in Jerusalem, how they had become bold witnesses to Christ in the city and how the Holy Spirit had led the disciples to disperse following persecution. He then turned further afield and found that Philip had left Samaria to go and meet with an African in the desert.

Philip, as we shall discover, was an amazing man. I love how Dr Luke introduces him – one of the seven men set apart by the apostles to look after the practical affairs of the early church – *full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom*.

We soon discover that Philip must have had the specific gift of evangelism. First, Luke records that after the apostles had laid hands and prayed for the seven, the Word of God spread and many more became followers of Christ, including many priests. However, once Saul of Tarsus began his campaign to rid Jerusalem of the Christ followers, Philip escaped to Samaria.

Philip didn't run away and hide. No, he continued to spread the good news of Jesus and many people responded. God performed many miracles and acts of deliverance through Philip's ministry. So effective was his preaching and so big the harvest that the news reached Jerusalem – and so the apostles went to investigate.

Being a typical evangelist, Philip was already prepared to move on! However, he was also very sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. In fact, not only was he obedient, but he was in for a spectacular 'ride'.

How Philip reached the desert road we can only speculate. What Dr Luke records for us is that once Philip arrived, he saw a chariot with the equivalent of the Chancellor of the Exchequer (finance minister) of Ethiopia sat inside. That was not totally surprising as he had been on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Folk from many lands did that when they were on a spiritual journey looking for the truth.

Surrounded by religions that had not satisfied his spiritual hunger, the Ethiopian decided to seek the truth as espoused by the Jews, through Judaism. The Ethiopian was on his way home and the unusual observation Philip made was that the Ethiopian was reading from the scroll of Isaiah, in particular from what we know as chapter 53, with its graphic description of the crucifixion of the Jew's Messiah.

Wanting to engage the Ethiopian in conversation, Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading. The Ethiopian replied that there was no way he could, unless someone explained it to him. So Philip seized the opportunity by starting from where the Ethiopian was reading and went on to describe how anyone can begin a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

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The Ethiopian responded immediately. Having been told the significance of water baptism (as a new believer), the Ethiopian asked Philip to baptise him there and then. Obviously, Philip didn't hesitate, as Dr Luke records how the Ethiopian commanded the chariot to stop so that he and Philip could go down into the water nearby and perform the sacrament. Philip must have described to Dr Luke how happy the Ethiopian was as he came back up out of the water. Interestingly, Dr Luke also records that somehow Philip disappeared from the Ethiopian's view and miraculously re-appeared in Azotus.

What did Philip do upon arriving at Azotus? Of course, he started telling people about Jesus. He continued to do so all the way along the coast until he arrived at Caesarea.

I can imagine Dr Luke being very impacted by Philip's life and I am not at all surprised that he would choose to record these events for posterity.

Luke would say to us today...

Philip showed us what it meant to be surrendered to the will of God. One moment he was enjoying a fantastic evangelistic crusade and then he was told by the Holy Spirit to leave it all behind and go into the desert to meet a solitary worshipper. Once that man had become a follower of Jesus and been baptised in water, Philip disappeared only to reappear in Azotus, continuing to witness about Jesus being the promised Messiah.

Prayer

Father, what an amazing life and experience Philip had. Please help me to realise if I surrender my life to Your will I may also have experiences that are totally miraculous. Amen.

Additional readings

- Acts 8:1-17
- Matthew 28:16-20
- Acts 1:1-8
- John 3:1-8

Questions

1. What do you think was more significant: the successful evangelistic crusade in Samaria or the salvation of the Ethiopian?
2. How was Philip able to leave the Ethiopian once he had baptised him in water?
3. What experience have you had of the specific leading of the Holy Spirit?

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Lesson 19 – Luke: Introduced us to Saul of Tarsus

Reading Acts 9:1-22

Dr Luke never got over his encounter with the Apostle Paul. However, although he quite obviously loved and respected Paul, he didn't overlook or sweep under the carpet Paul's past or ongoing character traits.

Luke was so impacted by Paul's life and testimony that he volunteered to accompany Paul on his later missionary journeys. Maybe Dr Luke included Paul's life change as part of the explanation why he would leave everything to join Paul.

Dr Luke retraces some of Paul's steps for us. He introduces Paul, not as an apostle but an accessory to murder. Not a social murder, like that of Moses killing the Egyptian, or of two people having a violent argument, but rather he introduces us to a young man who watched as people stoned a Christian martyr to death. The young man's complicity exposed by his willingness to volunteer to be the guardian of the clothes for those who committed the murderous act. As Stephen was stoned, the people laid their clothes at the feet of a young man, called Saul of Tarsus, who gave approval to Stephen's death.

That is how Dr Luke introduces us to the Apostle Paul. Not a great start but one that actually got worse.

Luke's next reference is describing how Saul of Tarsus began a campaign to rid the world of anyone associated with the new Christian group, called the followers of The Way. Obviously, Saul had already made successful in-roads into this group in Jerusalem and, with growing confidence, was turning his attention further afield towards Damascus.

Being a very determined man and with active and sympathetic backing from the ruling members of the Sanhedrin, Saul was determined to eliminate all those who would challenge the religious order of the day, particularly those who associated with what he considered an heretical sect. He would purge this theological error from Judaism completely. And so armed with letters of approval and authority, Saul rode off towards Damascus with his band of supporters.

What happened next was not only the beginning of a total transformation in Saul's life but also a powerful testimony to the power and grace of God. Additionally, it became a significant link in the chain of events which led to Dr Luke writing, not only an account of the life of Saul, recording the events of the early Church, the amazing activity of the Christians empowered by the Holy Spirit, but also an historical account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah known also as the Son of God.

It was, undoubtedly, the conversion of Saul that had a tremendous influence on Dr Luke. For he saw a Jesus-hater become one of the most ardent followers of Jesus Christ. We should never under-estimate the vehemence that Saul demonstrated against Jesus and His followers. Nor should we under-estimate the passion and fervour Saul had for maintaining the purity of Judaism. Both played a significant part in his determination and actions.

Saul was sincere in his beliefs. However, he was also sincerely wrong. The Bible shows us, many times, that sincerity is not the same as infallibility. The Bible reveals many people who were antagonistic towards God or misguided in their lifestyle being won over to become great examples to us all. Abraham, Jacob and Moses are just three examples.

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As Dr Luke listened to Saul's story he must have been enthralled. Here was a man on his way to murder the followers of Christ, with all the religious authority you could wish for, suddenly being confronted by the very One he was seeking to destroy.

I love what Dr Luke records. Jesus asked Saul – *Why are you persecuting Me?* Not why are you trying to kill *My followers* or why are you trying to destroy *My Church?* No! *Why are you persecuting Me?* I wonder if that was the clincher for Saul. He had to face the fact that he was engaged in a battle with a person, not an ideology. Whatever it was, Saul realised that he had met his match and acknowledged Jesus Christ as Lord for the first time in his life.

What happened next merits a study all of its own. Ananias was asked by God to go, regardless of the consequences, into what must have seemed like the enemy's camp, and pray for the salvation and Holy Spirit filling of Saul of Tarsus. Rather Ananias than me!

Luke would say to us today...

Ananias must have been an amazing man. He acted on the 'impulse' of the Holy Spirit even when his natural reaction was to be extremely cautious. He was basically prepared to give his life in order to reach out to the murderer of the Christians.

Prayer

Thank you for the example of Ananias. Please help me overcome my prejudices and to see people as You see them, rather than what I see and understand about them. Amen.

Additional readings

- Acts 7:54 – Acts 8:1
- Philippians 3:3-11
- 2 Corinthians 11:1-33

Questions

1. Why is it so significant that God chose Saul of Tarsus?
2. How would you have reacted if God had given you the 'job' God gave Ananias?
3. Why was Saul's heritage so significant in view of the role God had chosen for him?

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Lesson 20 – Luke: Noticed the new convert needed a friend

Reading Acts 11:19-29

It was understandable that the Jewish Christians would be suspicious of Saul and treat his conversion with cynicism. However, we read that the man Barnabas (whom we came across donating money to the church) reached out to Saul and took him under his wing. Nevertheless, Saul was not without enemies, both from without and within the church. Consequently, for everyone's peace of mind, Saul was despatched back to Tarsus via Caesarea. Interestingly enough, Dr Luke then adds the church enjoyed a period of peace, thus encouraging numerical growth and spiritual maturity.

Dr Luke records nothing more about Saul's activities for a period of approximately nine years. Indeed, it was not until there was a new wave of converts appearing out of the Gentiles, particularly some Greeks in Antioch, that further developments took place. There was renewed excitement in Jerusalem as a result, and Barnabas was despatched to Antioch to assess the situation and bring leadership.

Barnabas duly arrived and was very encouraged by all that was happening, particularly as he sensed it was indeed a wonderful move of God. Realising the complexity of the situation, he sought out someone who had a solid background in Judaism and was also familiar with contemporary Greek thought. Someone who was able to debate vigorously, yet with proven Scriptural knowledge and spiritual understanding, as well as Holy Spirit inspiration. He immediately turned his attention to Saul.

Once more, Barnabas rescued Saul from obscurity. Barnabas went over to Tarsus and returned with Saul, promoting him as a leader and teacher to the Church in Antioch. Dr Luke also mentions that it was at Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first called by the name "Christians".

Barnabas was a wonderful servant both to God and the church. Not only was he a great encourager and giver, he was also a discerning and self-effacing leader. He never sought recognition or status and was always ready to promote others, particularly if he could help them use and develop their spiritual gifts.

The impact Barnabas has had on the growth of the Christian Church is probably incalculable. His compassion for Saul and his persistent discipleship and mentoring have meant that, rather than losing one of the greatest leaders in the early Christian Church to obscurity through fear and prejudice, we have been blessed by Saul's incredible vitality, passion, persistence and teaching gift.

Without Barnabas we may never have had the Scriptures as we know them. For without Barnabas we may never have had Paul's letters and epistles, nor the wonderful writings of Dr Luke; both his Gospel record and the Book we call The Acts of the Holy Spirit.

Dr Luke records that, having arrived in Antioch, Saul went on to teach and serve the Church for at least a year, and that many people benefited from his ministry. Then, after a visit from a prophet who predicted a severe famine in Judea, a collection was made and the money received transported to Jerusalem by both Saul and Barnabas.

The thing I find quite amazing is that Barnabas is considered by so many as unique. Yes, of course he was unique in the sense that we are all unique. Yes, he did have a gift of encouragement, however, are we not all called to have a heart of compassion?

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Aren't we all called to be encouragers?
Aren't we all called to make disciples?
Aren't we all able to mentor someone else?
Isn't that what true parenting is all about?

Can I encourage you to decide to be even more encouraging to others? To look and find someone you can make a disciple? Seek out someone you can mentor? And, above all, invest in someone so they become a gift to the Church of tomorrow?

Luke would say to us today...

Barnabas was such a wonderful man. He went out of his way to introduce Saul to the new Christian Church – and the rest is history. Just think what a loss it would be if Saul were left to obscurity.

Prayer

Father, please help me realise that I have a role to encourage others. Help me also recognise the person You particularly want me to help mature in their relationship with You. Amen.

Additional readings

- Genesis 2:15-25
- 1 Samuel 18:1-4 and 23:15-18
- Luke 10:1-12

Questions

1. Why were the Christians afraid of Saul?
2. Why did Jesus send the disciples out two by two?
3. Who is your encourager and who do you encourage?

Lessons From the People of the Bible

Lesson 21 – Luke: Joined Paul on his missionary journey

Reading Acts 16:6-15

Dr Luke records that Saul adopted his other name of Paul after he and Barnabas reached Paphos on the island of Crete. This may have been a significant moment in Paul's life. It was probable that Saul had dual names – Saul being his Jewish name and Paul his Greek name. Whilst on Crete it appears Paul decided that his Greek name would be more acceptable to the locals.

What I find interesting is that Paul was convinced that his God-given mission was to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles, and it seems Paul chose this moment to re-enforce his vision, break from the past and make a public statement of his intentions for the future. He let his Jewish heritage fade into the background and, by using his Greek name, declared his new direction to reach out to the Gentiles. Certainly from that time on many Jews became his staunch opposition.

Sadly, shortly after this, John Mark left the missions trip, which eventually led to Barnabas and Paul having their irreconcilable argument over whether to take John Mark on their next trip. Barnabas was adamant to do so but Paul refused. They went their separate ways, with Barnabas taking John Mark while Paul continued his journey with Silas.

Whilst Paul and Silas enjoyed a successful itinerant mission, there seems to be a growing frustration. Paul was determined to reach out to the Gentiles and yet the Holy Spirit kept him from entering the Roman province of Asia.

However, the Holy Spirit knew what He was doing. Instead of going to Asia, Paul went to Troas. It was whilst he was there that two major events of the 1st Century Church history took place. First of all, it was the place where Dr Luke joined Paul for the rest of his journeys. We notice from Luke's narrative that his writing changed from the third person to the first person. Suddenly, Luke included himself in Paul's party.

Why Dr Luke chose to join Paul is unclear. Some feel that the reason Paul was excluded from Asia was related to his health. Maybe it was because of his famous *thorn in the flesh* that he consulted Dr Luke, the physician. It is also possible that Dr Luke recognised the health issues confronting Paul and decided to support the visionary missionary by joining Paul so that he could give Paul ongoing care. Whatever the reason, it appears Dr Luke gave up everything to join Paul on his future exploits.

The second history-making event was when Paul had a vision of a man inviting him to go to Macedonia. One of the interesting things about Dr Luke's record is that no sooner had Paul received the vision than he convinced everyone on the team to leave immediately.

Macedonia was a very strategic region. It was full of references to Alexander the Great. The full name of Troas was Alexandrian Troas, after Alexander. Philippi was named after Alexander's father and Thessalonica after his half-sister. Alexander's self-confessed goal was "*to marry the east to the west*" and so make it one world. Alexander had conquered the world – was he the 'man' in Paul's vision? Was that the background that envisioned Paul to strive to make one world for Christ?

Philippi was their first main destination and what a place that proved to be. First, they met up with Lydia, the rich merchant of purple dye. Purple dye was extremely expensive because it was collected drop by drop from a unique shell-fish. Lydia would have been near the very top of the social strata, and yet the exciting fact is that she became a Christian very early upon Paul's arrival.

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Immediately, she persuaded Paul, Silas and Dr Luke to stay at her home so she could extend her hospitality, a quality that Paul encouraged all his readers to cultivate.

Next came the humiliation, beatings and imprisonment in jail for both Paul and Silas. They were no normal criminals however, and despite having been severely beaten and chained, they were both seen bursting into songs of praise at midnight before God performed a miraculous deliverance.

Yes, Philippi was a significant stop in Paul's missionary journey. The church there became the subject of one of the greatest of Paul's writings, which we should all be very grateful for.

Yes, we have overwhelming evidence that the call to Macedonia was God ordained and Holy Spirit inspired.

Luke would say to us today...

Joining Paul was the most fantastic decision of my life. I learnt so much from him and experienced things I had never dreamt of. He taught me and showed me what it means for someone to be totally sold out for Jesus.

Prayer

Father, thank You so much for showing us that You don't expect us to go it alone. Thank You for arranging for Dr Luke to record so many incidents from their missionary journeys as a challenge and encouragement to us. Amen.

Additional readings

- Acts 20:1-16
- Acts 21:1-19
- Acts 28:1-16

Questions

1. What do you think made Dr Luke join Paul?
2. How do you think Paul felt to have Dr Luke join him?
3. Which of their joint experiences impacts you the most and why?

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Lesson 22 – Luke: Describes Paul’s final shipwreck

Reading Acts 27:6-44

I always find it particularly interesting when I hear people say that they want to follow Jesus or be like Paul. As we examine the life of Christ, we are overwhelmed by not only His character, but also the lifestyle and events He experienced.

Jesus was the most humble of all people. His compassion invariably meant that He served the people until He was tired and exhausted. Jesus exclaimed when He healed the woman who had a haemorrhage that He felt power flowing out of His body. Although He was perfect and righteous, Jesus had to endure the mocking and arrogant criticism of the religious leaders, who should have been His most ardent supporters.

Jesus usually walked wherever He went and often slept out in the open air. He was poor. He had one garment and yet even in death that was taken from Him. His body was actually laid in someone else’s grave.

His friends misunderstood Him, one betrayed Him, another denied ever knowing Him and the rest deserted Him. Christ endured the shame of trial, was unjustly flogged until He was within a breath of His life and then crucified on a cross, naked.

The question that comes to mind is – Are you sure you still want to follow Jesus?

Similarly, with Paul. Most people seem to read the accounts of Paul’s life in Dr Luke’s record in The Acts through rose-coloured glasses. This seems to me to be selective reading. Yes, it is exciting to read about all those who accepted the Gospel he preached. Yes, it must have been a great privilege to tell his life story to the royalty. However, when Paul presented his testimony before them, he was in the dock of the law court, not the podium of the palace banquet.

To obtain a more realistic view of Paul’s experiences we need to read his own account, as described in his second letter to the Corinthians. And I quote – *“I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received thirty-nine lashes from the Jews (forty was considered fatal). Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned (with rocks), three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and I have gone without food; I have been cold and naked.”*

A similar question raises its head – Do you really want to live a life like Paul’s?

We read Acts 27 and think it was the only shipwreck Paul suffered, however, Paul tells us it was only one of three he experienced. What we learn from this account is that Luke was with him. What an amazing man Dr Luke must have been. What a faithful friend and companion. Yes, he was with Paul in the good times of Lydia’s conversion to Christianity, but he still stayed beside Paul through this fateful journey to Rome.

I am so glad Dr Luke was there and was able to give us a first-hand description of the frightening events, very much on a daily basis. You can almost smell the salt on the pages as you read the narrative.

Lessons From the People of the Bible

Dr Luke records how Paul became the leader in the midst of the storm. Yes, although a prisoner, because he was an ambassador of Christ, Paul had full authority to take command and give life-saving advice. I love the way Luke records that the centurion over-ruled the soldiers who were trying to make a run for safety and made them cut the life-boat free. Paul predicted that all lives would be saved if they followed his instructions and Dr Luke concludes his record with the confirmation that everyone reached land safely.

I guess if anyone could claim they followed Paul it would have been Dr Luke. Yet, he seems to realise that the only One we should follow completely is Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. The One whom Paul spoke, reasoned and persuaded his listeners about was indeed the Promised Messiah for both the Jews and the Gentiles, including you and me.

Luke would say to us today...

I'm so glad I experienced that frightening shipwreck with Paul. It was a fitting climax to his life. It prepared us both for all that would follow. It taught me first hand what an exhilarating life a follower of Jesus can expect.

Prayer

Father, I admit I find it hard to understand why you allowed Paul and Dr Luke to experience such a frightening shipwreck and yet I thank You that they knew Your Presence through it all. Please re-assure me that You will be with me in whatever You have in store for my life. Amen.

Additional readings

- Acts 28:1-10
- 2 Corinthians 11:25-26
- 2 Timothy 4:1-18
- Hebrews 13:5-6

Questions

1. Why does God allow His servants to experience severe hardship?
2. How would you feel if you had to experience a similar extreme event in your service for God?
3. Why do we in New Zealand think our Christian experience should be free from tragedy, stress, pain and discomfort?