

INTERPRETING LUKE

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Structure

The third Gospel is the longest of the four Gospels. It has a mix of teaching, miracle, and parable. Luke gives us more parables than any other Gospel. Fully half of the material in Luke is unique to his Gospel. Where Matthew presents teaching in discourse blocks, Luke scatters teaching throughout his Gospel, usually in smaller units. Many key discourses in Luke happen in meal scenes (7:36-50; 11:37-52; 14:1-24; 22:1-38; 24:36-49), which recall Greek symposia where a respected teacher presents wisdom. A working outline of Luke shows his concern for geography in the progression of the Jesus account:

- I. Introduction of John the Baptist and Jesus (1:1-2:52) .A
 - A. Preface: Luke builds on precedent (1:1-4)
 - B. Infancy narrative: Forerunner and fulfillment (1:5-2:40)
 - C. Jesus's revelation of his self-understanding (2:41-52)
- II. I. Preparation for ministry: Jesus anointed as messianic son-servant (3:1-4:13)
 - A. John the Baptist: One who goes before (3:1-20)
 - B. Jesus: One who comes after (3:21-4:13)
- III. Galilean ministry: The revelation and teaching of Jesus (4:14-9:50)
 - A. Overview of Jesus's ministry (4:14-44)
 - B. Gathering of disciples (5:1-6:16)
 - C. Jesus's call to love (6:17-49)
 - D. Calls to faith and christological questions (7:1-8:3)
 - E. Faith and christological revelation (8:49-17)
 - F. Christological confession and instruction on discipleship (9:18-50)
- IV. Jerusalem journey: Jewish rejection and the new way of true discipleship with God (9:51-19:44)
 - A. Blessing of decision: Privilege, mission, and commitment (9:51-10:24)
 - B. Discipleship: On one's neighbor, Jesus, and the Father (10:25-11:13) .
 - C. Controversies, corrections, and calls to trust (11:14-54)
 - D. Discipleship: Trusting God (12:1-48)
 - E. Knowing the nature of the time: Israel rejects, but blessing still offered (12:49-14:24)
 - F. Discipleship in the face of rejection (14:25-35)
 - G. Pursuit of sinners: Heavenly examples (15:1-32)
 - H. Generosity: Handling money and possessions (16:1-31)
 - I. False teaching, forgiveness, and service (17:1-10)
 - J. Faithfulness in looking to the king, the kingdom, and the kingdom's consummation (17:11-18:8)
 - K. Humbly entrusting all to the Father (18:9-30)
 - L. Turning to Jerusalem: Messianic power and warnings (18:31-19:44)
- V. Jerusalem: The innocent slain and raised in preparation for disciple empowerment (19:45-24:53)
 - A. Controversy in Jerusalem (19:45-21:4)
 - B. Jerusalem's destruction and the end (21:5-38)
 - C. Betrayal and farewell (22:1-38)
 - D. Trials and death of Jesus (22:39-23:56)
 - E. Resurrection and ascension of Jesus (24:1-53)

Luke's Gospel proceeds from Galilee to Jerusalem. This fits the geographic progression of Luke-Acts as the story goes from Jerusalem to Galilee and then on a journey back to Jerusalem in the Gospel, then to Samaria and the ends of the earth, pictured by Rome as its center, in the book of Acts. In Luke's two volumes the center of activity for the gospel message of God moves out from Jerusalem to the center of the larger world in Rome.

The first half of the Gospel is structured much like Mark. The distinctive section of this Gospel is the journey of divine destiny that Jesus takes as he draws near to Jerusalem to face his approaching death in Luke 9-19. This key section juxtaposes two central themes: the rejection of Jesus by the leadership and the preparation of disciples for ministry without Jesus. The section shows that Jesus's teaching was aimed for the period after his death. A new era is dawning that needs a new perspective on how to live as God's people. As in Mark and Matthew, the disciples must learn that Jesus suffers as the Messiah, but in Luke the scope of discipleship in relationships and



values is given much more development. For Luke an array of ethics is displayed that is rooted in Jesus's teaching about the new way. The danger of an inordinate focus on wealth and the subtle seduction of possessions receives much attention as a potential distraction for discipleship. In the final week, Jesus dies unjustly as an innocent, but it is all according to a divine plan (Luke 23). Luke also goes to great lengths to prepare his disciples for his departure, as the journey section of the Gospel shows. John's Gospel does a similar thing with the upper room discourse (John 13-17).

Themes

Key themes center around that activity of God's plan. Things "must be" (δεῖ) in Luke (2:49; 4:43; 9:22; 24:7, 26, 47). God has designed a plan by which he will reach and deliver the poor, the oppressed, and those caught in Satan's oppressive grip (4:16-19; 11:14-23). The plan reflects a promise and fulfillment structure, in which scriptural realization of the plan is expressed through the words of the key figures in the account (7:28; 16:16). The opening infancy section does this through the use of hymns decorated in scriptural language, underscoring the note of joy that works through the Gospel. Things also happen with immediacy; many texts speak of what is happening "today" (σήμερον) (2:11; 4:21; 5:26; 19:9; 22:34; 23:43). The Gospel marches forward, as indicated by the geographic progression in the story.

Jesus appears as the Messiah-Servant-Lord. The basic category is his messianic one (1:31-35; 3:21-22; 4:16-30; 9:18-20), but as the story proceeds, it is clear that this role is one of great authority that can be summarized by the image of the judging Son of Man or by the concept of Lord (5:24; 20:41-44; 21:27; 22:69). All of these connections reflect what Scripture has said about the plan. Jesus also functions as a prophet, but as one promised like Moses, a ruler-prophet who is to be heard (4:20-30; 9:35). Jesus brings the kingdom, with the miracles evidencing its inaugurated presence and the defeat of Satan, which ultimately is what the kingdom brings with its fuller deliverance (11:14-23; 17:20-21). So there also is a future to that kingdom, which will see Jesus return to reign over both Israel and the nations, visibly expressing the sovereignty he now claims (21:1-38). Thus, Jesus's deliverance looks to the realization of covenantal promises made to Abraham, David, and their nation (1:45-55). The kingdom is now and not yet. Disciples are to live in a way that points to what is to come.

The national leadership is steadfast in its rejection of the message. The plan proceeds nonetheless. Israel will experience judgment for being unfaithful (19:41-44; 21:20-24). Jerusalem will be destroyed as a picture of what final judgment is like and as an assurance that God's program is taking place. That precursor of final judgment came in AD 70. Efforts to call Israel to faithfulness continue despite their refusal to embrace God's care and promised one. Yet hope for a future for Israel remains, as texts like Luke 13:34-35, 21:20-24 suggest and Acts 1:6-7 and 3:18-22 affirm.

In the meantime, Jesus forms a new community, which in the book of Acts is called "the Way". This community is made up of those who turn to embrace Jesus's message and follow in faith. Luke likes to speak of this response in terms of repentance, looking back to the change of direction that faith brings (5:32). Surprisingly, it is tax collectors and sinners who are most responsive, while the Jewish leadership is steadfast in rejection (7:29-30; 18:9-14). Women also abound in Luke as examples of spiritual responsiveness (2:38-39; 7:36-50; 8:1-3). Jesus wants the community to take the initiative in reaching out to all of these fringe groups, including the poor and oppressed (4:16-19; 6:20-23). Jesus's engaging the fringe of society shows that he has come to draw all to God, and it is also God's testimony that salvation is for anyone. Jesus's word and deed match in the show of such extensive compassion, a model for ministry that he wants his disciples to reflect.

Jesus's work brings intense rejection and will lead to persecution one day. This means that disciples must persevere in their walk in the face of great pressure (21:7-19). However, enemies should be loved, God should be trusted, prayer should abound, and watchfulness for God's remaining work should continue (6:27-36; 11:1-13; 12:22-31; 18:1-8). The two great obstacles to discipleship are the pressure that this persecution produces and excessive attachment to the world, especially through possessions (8:11-15; 18:8 raises the question of whether anyone will stay faithful until Jesus returns). Thus, Luke challenges the wealthy with regard to their stewardship of what God gives to them.

Luke seeks to reassure his readers that rejection by the world is not a sign of the Gospel's inauthenticity. Such rejection was at the heart of the plan all along. So readers can be assured of the truth concerning the things they have heard about Jesus (1:1-4). Reassurance is the key motive for this Gospel.

What Jesus gives through his work is deliverance, forgiveness, and ultimately enablement. For this evangelist, the "power from on high" of the Spirit is to be given now that Jesus is raised (3:15-16; 24:49). His ascension will allow disciples to accomplish all that God has for them. For Luke, this hope stands at the core of the Gospel, alongside the eternal life that God gives. In fact, the sign that the new era has come is that the Messiah brings the Spirit of God.