

Luke, Part 2

Acts 1:1-3

In the apostolic age, books were written by hand, not printed by machines. They were usually written on parchments, and the standard length of that parchment might have been about 35 feet long, rolled up into a scroll and carried by hand from church to church. Luke initially wrote two volumes of history on separate scrolls, the first being the gospel account of Jesus' life that bears his name. And the second is the book we begin to study this morning. Two volumes, very much joined together. That connection is obvious by the words themselves. I just read the first three verses of the book of Acts. Listen to the similarity of the words with the beginning of the gospel of Luke,

Luke 1:1 "Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, 3 it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, 4 that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed."

Luke is a careful historian, well educated and intelligent. He is an excellent writer. R.C. Sproul notes this, "Luke, the beloved physician, was an educated man. His Greek is one of the highest in terms of literary quality to be found in the New Testament. He provides evidence of his academic credentials. He is writing not just as a believer but as a historian, basically saying, "I take great care to trace the story from the beginning, from those who were there, to include in my account things that either I saw or other people saw, whom I have interviewed." We get more information in the Gospel of Luke about the birth of Jesus than from any other source."

Sproul continues, "Luke labors the point in the beginning of the Gospel of Luke and in the beginning of Acts that he was not writing a religious tract; he was writing history, one that has been corroborated by eyewitness testimony and by what he calls in his prologue to Acts "many infallible proofs."

This book of Acts which we begin to study this morning is the second volume written by Luke, also addressed and dedicated to the respected by otherwise unknown person identified as Theophilus.

v.1 "The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, 2 until the day in which He was taken up."

That former account, or first account, identified as Luke's gospel, included the historical account of Jesus' life up to and including his ascension, when "he was taken up" into heaven. Luke is the only gospel writer to give us that account.

Luke 24:50 "And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. 51 Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven. 52 And they worshiped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, 53 and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God. Amen."

We will see that ascension here at the beginning of the book of Acts as well,

v.9 "Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. 10 And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, 11 who also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into

heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”

So two volumes by the same author. But how do we know it was Luke, the physician, since he doesn't give us his name in the book itself? Let me provide a couple of biblical references just to make his authorship clear. First, note the greetings at the end of Paul's letter to the Colossians,

Col. 4:12 “Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. 13 For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis. 14 Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you. 15 Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church that is in his house.”

So Luke was a companion of the Apostle Paul, a trusted and faithful helper. Paul writes to Timothy,

2 Tim. 4:9 “Be diligent to come to me quickly; 10 for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica—Crescens for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia. 11 Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry.”

Luke is mentioned in Philemon as well. And then, so that you know it is Luke who writes the book of Acts, you should note several places where the author uses the first person plural, speaking of “we,” including himself in the events that are taking place.

Acts 16:8 “So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. 9 And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” 10 Now after he had seen the vision, immediately

we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them. 11 Therefore, sailing from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and the next day came to Neapolis, 12 and from there to Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a colony. And we were staying in that city for some days. 13 And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there. 14 Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. 15 And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” So she persuaded us.”

There is another passage where Luke includes himself in the activities of Paul in Acts 20, and then again in,

Acts 21:1 “Now it came to pass, that when we had departed from them and set sail, running a straight course we came to Cos, the following day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. 2 And finding a ship sailing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 3 When we had sighted Cyprus, we passed it on the left, sailed to Syria, and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload her cargo. 4 And finding disciples, we stayed there seven days.”

There was no question from the earliest church tradition that those references are all to Luke, and there has never been any doubt as to his identity as author of both the gospel and the book of Acts. Hence my sermon title, Luke part 2.

The actual title is, however, has a bit of uncertainty. Typically, from the first centuries of the church, the full title has been “the Acts of the Apostles.” Many have suggested that the title ought

more rightly to be “the Acts of the Holy Spirit.” More commonly, I with many others simply call it the book of Acts, and since the title itself isn’t part of the inspired text, at the end of the day, it doesn’t really matter all that much. But what does matter is that Luke, the beloved physician and faithful historian, has given us, first of all,

I. THE STORY OF JESUS.

Again to quote Sproul, “Luke labors the point in the beginning of the Gospel of Luke and in the beginning of Acts that he was not writing a religious tract; he was writing history, one that has been corroborated by eyewitness testimony and by what he calls in his prologue to Acts “many infallible proofs.”

Notice how the book of Acts refers to the former account, with the description,

A. What Jesus began to do and teach.

v.1 “The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach...”

That former account, the gospel of Luke, gives us a very good summary of what that refers to.

Luke 24:46 “Then He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 And you are witnesses of these things. 49 Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high.”

The gospel is all about Jesus, his suffering, and his resurrection! The gospel is all about the call to repentance for sin and the promise of forgiveness of those sins. And the gospel is, then, to be proclaimed to all the nations throughout the whole

world. The beginning of that gospel witness is, of course, the subject of this book of Acts. And the foundation of that gospel is what has gone before, namely “all that Jesus began both to do and teach.” It’s all about Jesus. As John would later put it so well,

1 John 5:11 “And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”

The transition from Luke part 1 to Luke part 2 is the transition from Jesus’ presence on earth with his disciples to his presence with his father in heaven, and the moment of that transition was his ascension.

B. The ascension of Jesus.

Luke says it so plainly,

v.2 “...until the day in which He was taken up.”

It is, of course, the same thing Luke refers to in Luke 24:50-53, which I read just a few minutes ago, that Jesus was “carried up into heaven.” Sometimes, perhaps, we don’t give enough emphasis to that event, his ascension. We focus rightly on the resurrection, for that was the triumphant moment when the power of death of destroyed, that was the climactic demonstration of the work of salvation itself, that we might be raised from the dead with Jesus. The resurrection is the hope and promise of life itself, and becomes the chief emphasis when Paul speaks of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15. But none of that does away with a right and proper emphasis upon what comes next. Jesus ascended into heaven.

It is part of our creeds, the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed we profess so often, “he ascended into heaven.” It is also part of our Westminster Confession, where we read in chapter 8,

“On the third day he arose from the dead, with the same body in which he suffered, with which also he ascended into heaven, and there sits at the right hand of his Father.” So it is good to recognize that the ascension also includes what we call his session—sitting at the right hand of his father, a position of ultimate authority and power. And that is where he is.

Luke then gives us a description of what took place during the brief time when Jesus was on the earth after the resurrection but before the ascension.

II. THE POST RESURRECTION TESTIMONY OF JESUS.

It was a period of,

A. Forty days.

Those were the days “after his suffering,” according to verse 3. Suffering there refers to the whole of his work of redemption, the whole process of what our catechism calls his estate of humiliation. It would include even the years of his human life on earth, when he endured the limitations of a real human nature. Certainly included in that suffering was his betrayal by Judas, his arrest, the mockery of his trial, and the crucifixion itself, up to an including his death, and even the three days when his body remained under the power of death. After that suffering, beginning with his resurrection on the third day, Jesus remained on earth for forty days. And he did so for one obvious and important purpose—to give actual, physical, human evidence of his resurrection. In fact, Luke refers to,

B. Unmistakable proof of his resurrection.

v.3

The NKJV uses the word “infallible,” which might confuse us since we typically use that word to describe the Bible itself, words

infallible, without possibility of error. A better word might be “unmistakable proofs.” Convincing proofs. Sure and certain proofs. In other words, there is clear and unmistakable that Jesus was both put to death upon the cross and that he rose from the dead to live again. He spent forty days on earth giving that proof in his own human flesh and existence. That proof is of such importance that Paul would mention it in 1 Corinthians 15 when proclaiming the gospel,

1 Cor. 15:3 “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. 6 After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. 7 After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles.”

We don’t know a lot of details from this time, for it was a time of transition. Jesus was raised from the dead, but he was still able to show Thomas his wounds. He didn’t seem to live on earth the whole time those 40 days, but rather appeared on various occasions. He had a resurrected body, a glorified human nature, but still permitted himself to live among his disciples on earth as an unmistakable proof of his resurrection. For example,

Luke 24:30 “Now it came to pass, as He sat at the table with them, that He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him; and He vanished from their sight. 32 And they said to one another, “Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?” 33 So they rose up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, 34 saying, “The Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!” 35 And they told about the things that had happened on the road,

and how He was known to them in the breaking of bread.”

He was careful, that no one think that situation was permanent, remembering what he said to Mary Magdalene upon his resurrection,

John 20:14 “Now when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, “Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away.” 16 Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to Him, “Rabboni!” (which is to say, Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.””

Unmistakable proof of Jesus’ resurrection, evidence made certain as Luke notes, by,

C. The work of the Holy Spirit.

Luke describes these 40 days before the ascension with the words of verse 2, when Jesus...

v.2 “...through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen.”

Don’t miss that brief reference, “through the Holy Spirit.” I can’t explain all the details of Jesus’ life those 40 days. I can’t explain how he could have a resurrected, glorified body and, at the same time, show himself to his disciples as he did. But I don’t have to explain it, other than this, the Holy Spirit accomplished it. The Holy Spirit did it. Many appearances of Jesus are recorded for us in the Bible, and the Holy Spirit brought it about, to give clear and unmistakable evidence that Jesus is risen from the

dead. And, as verse 2 also notes, those appearances included the important work of choosing the apostles who would become the foundation of the church.

v.2. “...until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen.”

D. The selection of the apostles.

The distinction is now made between the disciples and the apostles. Other than Judas, the eleven remaining disciples were the ones identified as Apostles, a designation which would be extremely important. Disciple would come to define any and all of Jesus followers, but apostle refers to a specific office within the church that would be established. Indeed, the foundation of that church. And Jesus would choose them. Jesus would select them, elect them, by God’s own choice. And he would exercise his own authority on earth in his place, as we read in,

John 20:19 “Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, “Peace be with you.” 20 When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. 21 So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” 22 And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Judas, of course had to be replaced, so that choice was made by inspired revelation by use of lots.

Acts 1:21 “Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was

taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.” 23 And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. 24 And they prayed and said, “You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen 25 to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place.” 26 And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles.”

Peter would later speak of the authority and commission given to him as an apostle,

Acts 10:39 “And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. 40 Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, 41 not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. 42 And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead.”

Paul would then write this of those apostles in terms of their function in the church,

Eph. 2:19 “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

The church is described as a building, and the apostles, chosen by Jesus, are the foundation of that building! They were taught by Jesus as a witness to his life and ministry on earth. And

the message they would teach is quite easy to summarize. The message was, very simply, the declaration of,

III. THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

v.3b “...being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.”

Jesus had already made it clear, that with his coming to earth, his first coming, the kingdom of God was at hand. In other words,

A. The kingdom has come.

That is the first thing “pertaining to the kingdom of God.” It has come. It is a present reality. That declaration was made plain by John the Baptist in announcing the coming of Jesus the Messiah,

Mat. 3:1 “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 2 and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

Jesus would make that plain as well. The message is quite simple,

Mark 1:14 “Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, 15 and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”

Also, Luke 11:19 “And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. 20 But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you. 21 When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace. 22 But when a stronger than he comes upon him and overcomes him, he takes from him all his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoils.”

Jesus is that strong man! Jesus casts out demons by his own divine power, and thus he declares, “the kingdom of God has come upon you.” It is a present reality, for Jesus is king, who now reigns upon his throne at the right hand of God in heaven. He is king of kings and Lord of lords! That’s the apostolic message that would be proclaimed by the church until Jesus returns a second time in triumph and glory. The kingdom has come. That is the message Jesus entrusted to his apostles, and as an introduction to the rest of this book of Acts, it is that apostolic message regarding the kingdom of God that the church would continue to proclaim to the whole world.

B. The kingdom will extend to the ends of the earth.

The task, the commission, which Jesus gave to his apostles as the foundation of his church, was to bear a witness to that kingdom. So we read,

v.8 “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

That verse, as you may well be aware, that verse is a helpful summary and outline for the rest of this book that we will be studying together for the next many months. To this day, we will build upon the foundation laid by the apostles, “speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.” The full consummation of that kingdom will be made evident on that future day when Jesus returns, but the reality of the kingdom is now. The mission of the early church, and the mission of our church, is to bear witness to that kingdom to the end of the earth. And so I declare and proclaim to you today,

Mark 1:15 “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”