



Session Four

The Gospel of Luke, Pt.1

Luke 1 & 2

Questions to consider as you read Luke Chapters 1 & 2

As you read these opening chapters of Luke, note what they're trying to accomplish:

- a) provide a social and historical setting for Jesus' ministry;
- b) introduce the ministry of Jesus in terms of his superiority to John the Baptist;
- c) establish Jesus as the Messiah in the lineage of David;
- d) illustrate that, as the Messiah, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's covenant promise as evidence that God can be trusted to do what God promises to do.

Note, too, that here at the beginning Luke establishes a theme that will run throughout his telling of the Gospel: *community*. The Jesus story is not just about Jesus but about God, working through Jesus, to create community, especially a community of those who, otherwise, would seem to be outsiders or, at best, utterly ordinary. Consider the key players in these two chapters: Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Simeon, and Anna. As you read, notice who and what they are and—perhaps more to the point—who and what they're *not*.

1) Mindful of these key players, notice there are four proclamations/hymns/songs in these first two chapters of Luke: one by Mary (1:46-55), one by Zechariah (1:67-79), one by Simeon (2:29-32, 34-35), and one by Anna (2:38). As you read them, note how, collectively, they don't just set the stage for Jesus' coming and define much of his ministry. They also, in the person of each individual giving voice to them (Mary, Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna) represent the ordinary and/or marginalized peoples for whom Jesus has a particular heart. Further, each represents a way of reacting to the work and presence of God in their lives and the world, ways you'll see repeated again in the behaviors of people Jesus meets throughout his earthly ministry.

2) Read 1:8-17. The timing of the angel's announcement to Zechariah is significant. Zechariah was one of approximately 18,000 priests in the early first century priesthood; specifically, he was a member of the eighth order, Abijah. A priest only officiated in the way Zechariah does here once in his life, having been selected by lot. The angel appears to Zechariah as he places

incense on the altar inside the Temple. God chooses that precise moment to initiate breaking into human history in the person of Jesus Christ. Why?

3) Read 1:17. What do you think is meant by “turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous”? Note, too, that John will “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” What do you think “make ready” involves?

4) You’ve read the details (setting, the people involved, etc.) of the angel’s announcement to Zechariah. When you read about the angel’s announcement to Mary (1:26-38), note the differences and the similarities—what do they say about the differences and similarities between John and Jesus?

5) For 1:26-38, you may find it helpful to read the handout, *The Birth of Jesus*.

6) 1:46-55 is also known as the *Magnificat*. It starts as a hymn of praise but then, at verse 50, shifts to something more like a profession of faith. Verses 50-55 are, in short, a description of the character of God. But notice the terms Mary uses: look at what she says in verses 51-55. What do these things say about God’s character, values, and priorities? Do you see any parallel between Mary’s words here and words of Jesus you read in Matthew 5?

7) 1:68-79 is also known as the *Benedictus*. Note, first, that even though these are words of Zechariah spoken on the birth of John, most of what he says is about Jesus. Zechariah’s words also contain a lot of Old Testament imagery. The other thing you may care to note is the light-related imagery in verses 78-79, imagery Luke will continue to use relative to Jesus (and will become even more prevalent in the Gospel of John).

8) For 2:1-20, you may find it helpful to read the handout, *The Birth of Jesus*.

9) Luke’s narrative of the birth of Christ is among the most well-known passages in all Scripture. As such, its very familiarity can work against us taking the time to carefully note the details Luke does—and does not—provide. In fact, the details of the actual birth are limited to a single verse, 2:7. Consider the extraordinarily complicated logistics of a coronation or presidential inauguration, then ask yourself: What motivation might there be on God’s part to choose to become flesh (incarnation) in such a way that the pertinent details could be summarized (depending upon the translation you’re reading) in less than 30 words?

10) God could’ve chosen anyone to whom to first announce the birth of the Messiah. Why do you think God chose shepherds?

11) Look again at how you answered questions 9 & 10. What do your answers suggest about what following Jesus should and should not involve?

12) Note carefully what happens in 2:22-40. This will be very important when Jesus confronts the Pharisees during his earthly ministry. Mary and Joseph clearly are pious Jews, following what the Law prescribed after the birth of a child. Jesus, therefore, was raised in a home where the Law was honored, not ignored. It's worth noting, too, that the sacrifice offered by Mary and Joseph—a pair of doves or pigeons—was typically the offering made by people who were poor.

13) 2:25-35 tell us about Simeon. As you read this passage, note who and what Simeon was, what he was expecting, and who/what motivated his actions. Simeon's proclamation clearly identifies Jesus' mission of salvation, but note verse 32: for whom is salvation intended?

14) Look at 2:34-35. This is a significant shift in tone from the words Simeon spoke in verses 29-32. What do Simeon's words foreshadow about not only Jesus' ministry but about how his ministry will be received? Do these words support the belief that Jesus' earthly ministry was first and foremost about salvation?

15) Anna, we're told in 2:36, was a prophetess. Luke emphasizes the role of women in Jesus' earthly ministry to a degree no other Gospel does. Note that she just knows who and what Jesus is.

16) 2:40 and 51-52 are more difficult than they at first appear. They are all we know of Jesus' life between his birth and the beginning of his earthly ministry save for the Temple episode in 2:41-50. We're told twice that Jesus grew in wisdom, which suggests that Jesus was not born knowing everything. That seems self-evident for any person until we remind ourselves that Jesus was not just fully human but also fully divine which means, by definition, that he knew all things. This raises a question that has been debated ever since Jesus' ministry itself: was Jesus born fully divine or did he gradually grow into divinity (as it were) or, as some argue, did he not become divine until he was baptized in the Jordan by John? Before you attempt an answer to this, look at the next question.

17) 2:41-48 can be seen as being about many things: Jesus being raised as a pious, observant Jew; the full humanity of Jesus being displayed in his failure not only to let his parents know where he'd be but also in, seemingly, not being concerned about his parent's panic at discovering he wasn't with them; or the curious fact that in spite of having been told by angels prior to Jesus' birth that he was the Son of God, Mary and Joseph not understanding why Jesus would tell them they should've looked in "my Father's house" to begin with. Most importantly, however, this event provides Jesus' first testimony about himself: he must be *in his Father's house*. Pious Jews of Jesus' time did not refer to God as "Father." For Jesus to do so was not only, frankly, scandalously blasphemous but could only mean that he knew God was his Father...which meant that Jesus knew he was more than merely human at that point in his life (as opposed, for instance, to when he was baptized).