
Gospel Beginnings: Luke

DAVE BAST

What would we have ever done without the evangelist, Luke? Luke alone gave us the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. He told us about Zacchaeus, the road to Emmaus, the story of Pentecost, the dramatic moment of Saul's conversion on the Damascus Road, and so much more. All of that comes from Luke, the Gospel writer; but in this Advent season, we are reminded that Luke also is the one who told us most of the stories about Jesus' birth and what happened before that birth as well, including the shepherds, the angels, and the baby lying in a manger. So today on Groundwork, let's dig into the first chapter of Luke's Gospel to see how Luke helps us celebrate the advent of our savior.

Scott Hoezee;

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and welcome again, Scott. It is great to be with you as we are working through, during this Advent season, the opening chapters of each of the four Gospels; and today we come to what is really the opposite of Mark, I guess you could say. Mark is the Gospel that starts very abruptly, just: This is the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and then right off into John the Baptist in the wilderness. Luke has all of this wonderful background.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; nobody tells the pre-story of Jesus' birth and the actual story of Jesus' birth quite like Luke. Matthew gives us just a little bit. We find out about Joseph's dream, but Matthew begins with a family tree. Mark has nothing about Jesus' birth or origins at all; but Luke takes his time – in fact, these first two chapters in Luke are a couple of the longest chapters in the whole Bible. They run up to almost 80 verses in one of them; so Luke has a lot to tell in terms of where Jesus came from; so, in this Advent series, when we turn to Luke it is like drinking out of a fire hose to get all this information.

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly. He starts by addressing his book. This is also unique among the four Gospels. He mentions a person he calls Theophilus – a friend of some kind – and that name in Greek means: Lover of God. So, perhaps this is a real person, perhaps it is just a character that Luke has sketched out of a potential, interested observer or listener who wants to learn. So, that is the address, and he says: I have carefully gone into this. I have done all kinds of research, Theophilus, to tell you the truth about what happened.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Luke, as many of us know, also wrote the book of Acts, and also addressed the book of Acts to Theophilus. It was sort of volume 2 of Luke's story of Jesus, and both of them went to Theophilus. Among other things, whoever Theophilus was, since it is a Greek name, that tips us off more than you get even in Matthew, Mark or John, that Luke probably has a Greek reading audience in mind; people with a little less Jewish background than certainly Matthew's readers, who appear to have been a very Jewish audience. So, we are going to get the Gospel from an outsider's perspective, introducing not only Jesus, but the whole history of the Israelite people that led up to Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Scott, I think that is a great point. We mentioned in one of the earlier programs in this series that there is a reason why God inspired four Gospels, because they each have their own kind of flavor and perspective. Mark is the immediate, chop-chop, action, fast-paced, go from here to there... Matthew, that Jewish background, and really trying to address probably people on the fence still. Is Jesus the Jewish Messiah? Yes, He is. And Luke, this gentile, writing for gentiles; the only non apostle.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; not one of the twelve. We think that Mark had a lot of help from Peter...

DAVE BAST

Right; so there is an apostolic witness behind that, but really, Luke is kind of an outsider.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and he is writing this... And so, let's just listen to these first four verses of Luke 1:

¹Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us. ²Just as they were handed down to us by those who were from the first eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³And with this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I, too, decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus. ⁴So that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

So, Theophilus obviously has already been taught the Gospel as a believer, but Luke says: I am going to write it down so you see how it all comes together – all the details will get filled in here.

DAVE BAST

Yes, an orderly account. Just to run down a few of them in these first two, long chapters: He starts with the background of Zechariah and Elizabeth, this faithful, devout, old couple. He is a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem, and the angel Gabriel appears to him and tells him: You are going to have a child, Zechariah.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and that is, of course, who becomes John the Baptist, and then we pivot from Elizabeth, who was a woman older in years, and who was thought not able to have a child – and how many times does that come up in the Bible? So, the surprise for Elizabeth is she has a child in her old age, and then Luke pivots right from her to somebody who was not supposed to have a child yet because she was too young, and not even married, which is, of course, Mary.

DAVE BAST

And the beautiful story of the Annunciation, as we call it, when Gabriel again comes and says to Mary, “You too will have a child,” and Mary’s reaction to that – we will look at that in just a moment in this program; and then Elizabeth and Mary come together. They were relatives – they were some kind of cousins, perhaps; and Elizabeth is six months pregnant, and meets Mary with this amazing interchange: Hail, favored one. You are blessed among women. The baby leapt in my womb at the sound of your voice.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Wonderful details; and again, you look at all of this, Dave, and you think, obviously Luke did do a lot of research here. I mean, some of what he has in here he surely could only have learned from Elizabeth or from Mary. He must have interviewed them and talked to them. He really wanted to find out what this was like so he could tell the story in very fine detail.

DAVE BAST

Yes; Luke was trained as a doctor, a physician, and traveled with Paul, perhaps in that capacity; but he was really a historian at heart, and he used a historian’s methodology.

One of the interesting things about the Gospels that modern scholarship tells us is that at that time they were especially interested in eyewitness testimony. They did not want to get a story from a history book. If it was at all possible, they wanted to talk to the actual living participants in some great event, and that is exactly the approach that Luke takes. He says in the opening prologue addressing Theophilus: You know, I went about looking for those who had been the eyewitnesses of these things.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is interesting, too, we sometimes think – when we think of the Bible, and particularly the Gospels – we sometimes have this view of inspiration that the writers of the Gospels or the writer of Isaiah or whoever kind of just took dictation; the Holy Spirit just dictated and they just had their pen and pencil in hand and they just wrote down what the Spirit poured into their ear; and of course, the Spirit is involved. This is inspired work, but what is interesting is, Luke reminds us the Holy Spirit works through careful research, too. It all is a tool in the Spirit's hands.

DAVE BAST

It kind of makes me think of preaching, Scott, you know. Yes, sure; we want the Spirit to bless this act and only when He uses the message and applies it to people's hearts, but that does not mean we do not have to work hard and think hard and write hard, absolutely. So, that is the way Luke approached it, and in just a moment or two we are going to dip into that first chapter and look at – it is 80-some verses, so we are going to have to selectively study it, but we will look at some of the main emphases in Luke 1 as part of our preparation during this Advent season.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and our promise a few moments ago was that we were going to dig into Chapter 1 of Luke. We talked a little bit about the prologue addressing Theophilus, but here is one of the great events in the whole Christmas story. I will read it from Luke 1, beginning at verse 26:

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee. ²⁷To a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendent of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you." ²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. ³¹You will conceive and give birth to a son. You are to call His name Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; ³³and He will reign over the House of Jacob forever. His kingdom will never end." ³⁴"How can this be," Mary asked the angel, "Since I am a virgin?" And then the angel explains it is going to happen through the Holy Spirit.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is so much that is wonderful about this story. I like how it begins and ends. When I have preached on this, I have noted Mary does not say much here. She really kind of says two things: How can this be; and then at the end she says: Let it be. And that is just – from "how can it be?" to "let it be," is the perfect picture of faithfulness and trust. But I also really like that an angel appears to this young girl; she probably is what today we would think of as a high schooler, although she would have been considered an adult in her day; but she is probably in her teen years – late teen years – a young woman. So, the angel comes and says: Hello. You are highly favored; and it does not say: And Mary thought, that is terrific, wonderful. No, she was troubled by this greeting, and I think the reason she was troubled is she knew her Bible pretty well. Usually when an angel comes to somebody and says: You are the one. They are in for some trouble. They are in for a hard life.

DAVE BAST

Yes. The other interesting thing is, you know, we have so sentimentalized the idea of angels. The Bible clearly teaches that angels are real beings – beings of infinite glory and majesty and power – well, maybe not quite infinite – God is infinite, but they partake something of that...

SCOTT HOEZEE

They are majestic.

DAVE BAST

Yes. Usually the first thing an angel has to say when they actually appear – a real angelic visitation is: Hey, hey; don't worry. Take it easy. I am not going to blast you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, the angel's first cue card is always: Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. Mary was afraid, but also troubled because she knew what this angel was saying to her was probably going to change her life forever; and boy, if she thought that, she was really, really right. She knew that this was going to change everything; but it is interesting that very soon – according to Luke – very soon after this encounter, something of what we could call the core dynamic – a main feature of what will become the Gospel of Jesus – sunk in for Mary. After she greets Elizabeth, she sings the first of two great songs in Luke 1; and just listen. This is sometimes called the *Magnificat* because opens, especially in the Latin translation, with: My soul magnifies the Lord; so, it is the *Magnificat*...

DAVE BAST

Or praises the Lord greatly, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But listen to what this young girl sings:

⁴⁶My soul glorifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. ⁴⁸For He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on, all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me. Holy is His name. ⁵⁰His mercy extends to those who fear Him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has performed mighty deeds with His arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵²He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. ⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things, but He sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped His servant, Israel, ⁵⁵remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendents forever, just as He promised our ancestors.

DAVE BAST

Magnificent; *Magnificat*, yes. C. S. Lewis once called this a terrible song; and he did not mean Mary was a lousy singer. What he meant was, it brings news of terror, in one sense, into the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, he meant it in that Latin sense of *terribilis*, of something that shakes you up – something that is quite remarkable – because here on the lips of a young woman, as we said a few minutes ago, she was a young woman, and filled with the Spirit and literally filled with the Son of God, now growing as a human child in her very womb, she is starting to understand something about the Gospel, which is God is going to save the world through her child, but not from the top down, but from the bottom up. That is going to be something that is going to be very central to the Gospel. It is not going to be about the powerful getting more power; it is going to be about the powerful getting sent away empty and the powerless becoming great in the kingdom of God. So, she sees all these reversals and points to them in this song.

DAVE BAST

I just had a little flashback – a snatch of Hebrew, which has mostly left my brain, but a few little phrases still knock around up there: the *am ha'aretz*; they used to talk about, especially in the First Century, the poor of

the land, they were called; and if you look at this story, Joseph and Mary, very humble, simple people; part of the poor who are watching and waiting for Israel's consolation. The great and the mighty, Herod in his palace, the chief priest in Jerusalem, they are not all that interested, quite frankly, in the promises any longer because they kind of have theirs; but it is the poor people, the humble people, the shepherds in the field, they are the ones who are watching and waiting – aged Simeon and Anna in the Temple. You know, Mary's song picks up on this theme. You can have it now or you can have it later, it is saying; but you cannot have it now *and* have it later. You either have to be living for that – for the promises of God – or you can live for the good things here and now. It is like what Jesus said in His parable of the rich man and Lazarus: You have had yours. You have had yours here and now, rich man. That is what you chose.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this is going to be a key theme in Luke's Gospel. Luke is the Gospel of elevating the poor and the marginalized; even that parable, Dave, you just mentioned. Of all the parables Jesus ever told, only one single character ever had a name, and that was the poor man, Lazarus, in the rich man and Lazarus – Luke's way of saying: Poor people are not a category, they have names. And Mary's song picks up on this. You know, in the Old Testament, you mentioned that little Hebrew phrase that came back to you, God was always concerned with three groups in Israel: The orphaned, the widowed, and the foreigner – the stranger in your gates – those three were always the marginalized, invisible members of society, just like Mary; a young girl with no social standing, utterly humble, and God lifted her up to become the mother of the Messiah, and just that alone told Mary: Hmmm, I think everything that we have always known about God having His eye on the sparrow, as her Son will go on to say later, is true.

DAVE BAST

Sure. Well, you know, Mary knew her Bible as well; and this song of hers just reeks of scripture. You think of Psalm 113: He has put the mighty down, but lifted up the poor from the ash heap, and given the barren woman a home. That is the God whom we fear – and love and serve – but we fear Him, too, because He is not to be trifled with. You can know Him, you can experience His salvation, but only if you are willing to repent and turn to Him on His terms.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as you said, Dave, Mary knew her scripture; and another person in this opening chapter who knows scripture really well is John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, and we will see that in just a moment when we look at his grand song.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Hi, you are listening to Groundwork; along with Scott Hoezee, I am Dave Bast, and we are digging into Luke Chapter 1. We have just been looking at the wonderful song of Mary, and the themes that she expresses as she has been told she will be the mother of the Messiah, of the Son of God; and now we are going to look at another song from a character who appears earlier in Luke 1. It is Zechariah, the old priest, who is visited as he is standing in the Temple about to offer a sacrifice – visited by Gabriel, who says: Your wife is going to have a son, even though she is way too old, and he is going to be the forerunner of the Messiah; and Zechariah says: Hey, wait a minute. And the angel says: All right; just for that, you are not going to be able to speak until he is born; but when he does, he too begins to sing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so for nine months Zechariah has been silent, but he obviously used this time well. He wrote a song, and so the moment his lips are opened again when his son is born he sings; and I will just read a few selections from Luke 1, starting at verse 68. Zechariah stands up and sings, full of the Holy Spirit, it says.

⁶⁸Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come to His people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant, David. ⁷⁶And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the most high, for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way for Him. ⁷⁷To give His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸Because of the tender mercy of our God,

by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven; ⁷⁹to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.

DAVE BAST

Wonderful stuff. You know, it strikes me again that Luke 1 is almost as much Old Testament as it is New Testament. It is really kind of a bridge because it is full of these psalm-like verses.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, when we looked at Matthew – and if you are familiar with Matthew just generally – you know, Matthew was writing for a Jewish reading audience; and so, Matthew sometimes seems like he could not go ten verses without directly quoting something from the Old Testament to back up his case for people who knew that. Luke does not quote the Old Testament, but he refers to it all over the place, and just like you said, slips it in. In this song, too, this whole song sounds like a psalm. It could be from the book of Psalms. He slips in reference, I think, to Psalm 23, those living in the valley of the shadow of death, that is Psalm 23 language; so, there are a lot of echoes of the history that is leading up to the Christ of God, Jesus.

DAVE BAST

And it is all about salvation, conceived in terms of light dawning, of brightness coming, of morning after a dark night; all these wonderful images that speak of hope and life and God keeping His promises. It is all just sort of forward-looking; and yet, it also focuses on the people that God will use to bring this about; and in Zechariah's case, specifically his son, John – John the Baptist, as he would come to be known.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So he hits all the themes that John, his son, will talk about, and the themes that Jesus will talk about: Forgiveness of our sins; tender mercy of God; I don't think the word grace is named here, but it is right there in the background; this is all about grace; all about mercy; all about God taking back the people who have turned away from Him; and it anticipates the verse that Paul will later write: While we were yet sinners, God loved us, and He forgave us; and that is what Zechariah is pointing ahead to and what his son, John, who will go on to become a very fiery – hellfire and brimstone preacher – but that is the stuff that John the Baptist 20 or 30 years later will be talking about in preparing the way for Jesus.

DAVE BAST

You know, it seems like there is a lot of music in Luke 1, and later on in Luke 2; in fact, in a future program we are going to look at the last of the songs that are here; but we also think about the angels singing in the Christmas story: Glory to God in the highest – the gloria in excelsis – kind of funny that the Christian faith is a singing faith. We make so much out of music, don't we?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes. A while back, the great theologian and preacher in the great awakening, Jonathan Edwards wondered one time: Why do we sing in church? Why isn't it enough just to read the Bible or just recite the great truths? Why do we sing? And Edwards' conclusion was: First, we seem to be made to sing by God; but second, there are some truths that are so beautiful, so rich, so loaded and so lyrical, that they demand to be sung; and the singing itself seems to touch us on a different level somehow.

DAVE BAST

I think that is clearly true. It is one of the reasons why we sing love songs. We need more. It is not enough... We can say, "I love you," but somehow when that is set to music, it helps us more fully engage and express the depths of what we feel; and something like that surely pertains to the Good News – the Gospel – of God's coming into our world. Luke has just set it up with these wonderful, psalm-like, Old Testament songs: Mary's song and Zechariah's song; but as we turn the page into Luke 2 and read the familiar words: A decree went forth from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled... And we see Joseph and Mary making their slow way to Bethlehem, we want to sing God's praises for that gift.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right; and Luke will show us the whole heavenly host are singing. All of the events here have set the universe to singing, and we can be thankful that Luke showed us just that.

DAVE BAST

Well, that is our program looking at Luke Chapter 1, and in the next program we are going to turn to John 1; the great declaration of the incarnation; so, tune in again; and thanks for joining Groundwork today. Don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future Groundwork programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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