

ABOUT LOVING LUKE

Everybody who knows me knows that Luke is my favorite Gospel. Very seldom does anybody ask me why. The obvious reason is that people are afraid I might tell them. Another long and boring dissertation, do you think? In any case, just a few weeks ago Diane Stellar asked me, right out in open Disciple Band, why I like Luke more than the other Gospels. I was delighted. But I asked her to wait until this morning to find out.

We need to begin with the inevitable preliminary comments:

1.) The fact that I like Luke best does not mean that I do not appreciate or study the other Gospels with a lot of gratitude. I suspect that's obvious, but just in case.

2.) One sermon will not give me time to tell you all of my reasons for loving Luke. This is not surprising. I cannot tell you everything about my sixty-year relationship with Mariana in twenty minutes either.

3.) Marcion, the first famous Christian heretic (about 150 A.D.) loved Luke and thought that the Gospel of Luke and Paul's letters were the only writings that should be included in the New Testament canon. There is no truth to the claims that my heresies and Marcion's heresies are in any way related.

4.) Finally, I have put copies of the commentary I wrote about Luke's Gospel – *The Believer's Road* – on the patio tables. They are free for the taking. Even though they are free, in all humility I still consider them valuable. I do because, while this book picks up information from the scholars, essentially it is written about the questions and comments and insights that have come over many years from the study groups and Disciple Bands that have gone through Luke with me. At the time the book was published in 1990, I had already been doing study groups for thirty-one years. In other words, they reflect the opinions and conclusions of people who were serious about walking the Christian Path or WAY. It is more than a "head trip" when we go through Luke thinking that "we are actually going to try to live by the things we learn and discover here." It makes all the difference.

Of course, reading *The Believer's Road* is not the same as wrestling through it with a group of fellow Christians. Reading it

only gets you about ten percent of what is being said. But some of you are determined never to get into a Disciple Band. That does not make me angry, by the way – just sad. So is ten percent better than nothing? I am never certain.

Here we go. I love Luke because:

Luke is the only Gospel writer who tells the story in two volumes. The Book of Luke tells the story of Jesus' life on earth, up to the time of His death and Resurrection. The Book of Acts tells the story of Jesus' leadership *after* the Resurrection. In other words, the Book of Acts tells about the Holy Spirit of Jesus carrying the story on into the Gentile world and about the unfolding drama of the formation of Jesus' church. Eventually we realize that this was Jesus' purpose and intention all along. It was not some shallow, dead-end Second Coming, trying to stay with pre-Jesus Jewish apocalyptic desperation. The dynamism of LIFE with the Holy Spirit was Jesus' purpose all along.

We live in a difficult and broken world, and we need to know that there is an unseen but very real Kingdom running alongside of and at places intersecting with this physical dimension. Luke does not live long enough to tell us the full story; after all, it is still going on. But the Book of Acts tells us enough to get us oriented in this ongoing drama. Neither Mark nor Matthew takes us on past the Resurrection. John writes twenty years later. He knows the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts, and he knows that everybody else does too. John certainly highlights the presence and the purpose of the Holy Spirit, and that's wonderful. But it is not the same as telling the story of how it was unfolding in the life of the early church. Paul, of course, is living it and awakening to it more and more. This is reflected again and again in his letters. Luke is a convert of Paul's, so he picks up a lot of Paul's awareness and perspective and passion. No doubt that also has a lot to do with why I love Luke so much.

Nevertheless, the two volumes of Luke: one telling the story of Jesus' physical life among us, and the other telling the story of our Risen Lord's Holy Spirit among us – that is huge for me. So I love Luke for making that perspective so clear. Nobody else does.

Luke is the only non-Jewish author of New Testament writings. I don't love him for that; I just notice it. Like all early Christians, Luke gets into the Jewish world and into the Jewish perspectives because that is where it is all coming from. Mark is the earliest Gospel, and the shortest. Matthew and Luke both pick up ninety percent of what Mark

has already written, but they both have sources of important information that needs to be added. I have friends who like Mark best because it is written earlier and therefore is more accurate – they say. That’s really careless logic, in my opinion. There are still eyewitnesses around, and some of them are saying, “Why didn’t Mark tell us this or include that?” In other words, Mark’s Gospel is not more accurate; it is just more truncated.

It is important to know that Matthew and Luke did not know each other. They did not collaborate, and neither one had any awareness of what the other one was writing. Sometimes they both include something not found in Mark, but of course they each tell it in their own way. When they include in their Gospels what Mark has already written, they stay pretty close to how Mark already told it. But what is most interesting, at least for some of us, is noticing what Matthew is telling us that nobody else has mentioned and what Luke is telling us that nobody else has mentioned. Some think this means that such information is not as reliable. I consider that to be very careless logic. If Luke is the only one who tells us the story of Zacchaeus, it does not mean that the story of Zacchaeus is dubious or unreliable. It means Luke has some Christian friends who have not talked to Mark or Matthew. Mariana does not know as much about Walter Pray as I do, because she did not go to Fullerton High School. This does not mean that Walter Pray did not exist or that I am lying if I tell you about him. I’m sorry that neither Mark nor Matthew knew about Zacchaeus. On the other hand, I am grateful that I do. Thank you Luke!

As mentioned, Luke is the only non-Jewish writer in the New Testament. Some of us notice that Luke has less angst about including the Gentiles. Luke tells the parables and teachings of Jesus with more freedom from “the Law.” In Luke, the Gospel of God’s love and grace is blazing and uncompromising. Maybe some of that is Paul’s influence, but nevertheless. And yes, I will give some illustrations in a minute.

But before going there, I want to say something about Luke’s relationship with Paul. It is not news to most of you, but still very important to me.

I claim that Luke was Paul’s best friend. For me, that is no idle comment. Paul had a long string of incredible friends: Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Mark, Lydia, Phoebe, Philemon, Onesimus. As I tick off the names, many of you know the stories that go with them, but some of you may not.

Barnabas was Paul's partner on the first missionary journey. He was the first member of the inner-Jerusalem circle of Christians to welcome Paul. Their reticence was understandable because, prior to his conversion, Paul had been arresting and persecuting Christians with authority from the Jewish leaders. Now he was back with, "Hey fellas, don't run and hide. It's okay to trust me now. I'm on your side." Right! Anyway, Barnabas was the first one to realize that Paul's conversion was genuine.

Silas was Paul's companion on the second missionary journey.

Timothy was a young man from Lystra, where Paul had been beaten and stoned and left for dead. Timothy played an increasingly important role as Paul's ministry unfolded, and Paul seemed to think of him as his protégé and probable successor. First and Second Timothy are letters in our New Testament – in case there is somebody here today who still doesn't think it is necessary for us as Christians to study some portion of the Scriptures each day. What was Timothy's grandmother's name? Her name was Lois, and she was a friend of Paul's. (Timothy's mother's name was Eunice.) Some would argue, convincingly, that Timothy was an even better friend to Paul than Luke.

Philemon had a slave named Onesimus, whom Philemon freed at Paul's urging. That is what Paul's letter to Philemon is about. Onesimus became the Bishop of Ephesus in later years.

And so on. I named eight of Paul's friends, and there are three times that many – before we even get to the casual acquaintances. But I have made my point. There are stories to go with the names of Paul's friends.

I claim that Luke was Paul's best friend among a whole host of wonderful friends. That kind of thing is important to me. I think that Christianity runs on friendship. Jesus bet His whole ministry on friendship. Yes of course, Jesus prayed – and He trusted and obeyed God – more than any other person who has ever come to this planet. But after that, Jesus bet it all on His friends. And apart from His friends, none of us would ever have heard of Him. If you are one of His friends, there are others who will hear about Jesus because of you. This is a story that goes on – that is still unfolding and being told.

Piecing together what information we have, Paul and Silas walk clear across Turkey trying to discern where the Holy Spirit wants them to start some new churches. It is one of those "everything we try to do

is wrong” kind of times. They run out of land at Troas, on the Aegean Sea. And there they meet Luke, who persuades them to come across the sea to Macedonia. At the first stop, Philippi, they are beaten and thrown into prison. We mentioned that last Sunday. More importantly, they meet Lydia (“down by the riverside”). Despite the outer circumstances, Philippi ends up being Paul’s favorite church. He gets more support and affection from Philippi than from any other place he ever went.

We learn some of the story from the Book of Acts and some from Paul’s letter to the Philippians. But right now I want to mention the “we” passages in the Book of Acts. We notice that when Luke is present in the narrative, he says “we” – “we went here” or “we did that.” When Luke is not present but only reporting what he knows about, he says “they” – “they did this” or “they went there.” So it’s interesting that when Paul and Silas go on to Thessalonica from Philippi, the text shifts to “they.” Follow it with me:

In Acts 16: “*We sailed from Troas We went outside the city gate by the riverside We met a slave-girl who was possessed by a spirit of divination*” But in Acts 17: “*They now traveled by way of Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica*” Apparently Luke stays in Philippi. Maybe Lydia is really beautiful; most certainly she is beautiful on the inside. In any case, if Luke and Lydia are among the leaders of the Philippian church, it is little wonder that this becomes Paul’s most supportive church.

Going on with the second missionary journey, Paul finally gets to Corinth, which is the center of that missionary journey. Then it’s back to Israel (Caesarea) and up to his “home church” in Antioch, which had ordained him to begin with. Eventually Paul will set out on his third missionary journey, heading for Ephesus, where he will be engaged for three years. Two and a half years in Corinth; three years in Ephesus; some travel time in between. At the end of his time in Ephesus, Paul goes back to Corinth for a short (three-month) visit of encouragement, and he intends to take a ship from there back to Syria. But he is carrying a large sum of money now – contributions from the churches to relieve Jerusalem Christians who have been suffering a famine – and this has caught the attention of brigands. There are also Jewish assassins on his trail now, as his reputation for splitting synagogues has grown increasingly worse. Discovering a plot against his life, Paul does not go onboard the ship, but instead goes by land back up and around the Aegean Sea to Philippi. He will

duck and dodge his way from there to Jerusalem, where his presence will end up causing a huge riot.

But back to Philippi: Luke names some of the people traveling with Paul. Many of them are representatives of the churches who have contributed to the offering going to Jerusalem. They want to help make sure the offering reaches its destination. Paul has split the company at the moment to confuse the brigands and the assassins. This is big stuff, and I'm just after tiny little details, which is how we piece this sort of thing together: *"These went ahead and waited for us at Troas; we ourselves sailed from Philippi after the Passover season, and five days later rejoined them at Troas, where we spent a week."* (Acts 20:5)

Clearly Luke has rejoined Paul as he came back through Philippi at the end of the third missionary journey. He has decided to go with Paul after a six-year interval. From this time on, they will be companions for the rest of their lives. They travel to Jerusalem together, and they go through the great riot there. Then Paul is under house arrest at Caesarea for two years. They go to Rome together for Paul's trial before the Emperor, and they survive the great shipwreck on the way. Then Paul is under house arrest in Rome for two years, and Luke is with him as they await the trial.

Now, you do not have to listen to me – nobody knows for sure – but if you do listen to me, I will tell you that Theophilus, to whom both Luke and Acts are addressed, is the court official at Rome who has been assigned to Paul's case. I contend that in those last two years at Rome, Luke is writing both Luke and Acts as a trial brief to set before the court. They want to make it clear that the Christian Movement is not a threat to Rome – that Christians are not a terrorist group; they are not a threat to the Empire. Nero has been in power since around 37 A.D. Under the influence of Seneca, he is a pretty good emperor for a while. But in 62 A.D. something changes – even his portraits look different – and he becomes increasingly cruel and sadistic. Nero ends up using Christians as scapegoats (for the great fire of Rome, among other things), and he will be responsible for the crucifixion of hundreds of Christians. Paul's case comes to trial somewhere around 65 A.D. All claims to the contrary, the Holy Spirit does not always save us in this life. And sometimes, as Paul himself muses, it may be a great favor when the Spirit does not save us here.

In any case, the Scripture reading this morning was from the twenty-eighth chapter of the Book of Acts – the last words we ever hear from Luke. There is no conclusion. We are not told what happened at the trial. The narrative simply breaks off. Hearing nothing more from Luke or Paul seems more than significant to anybody who knew them. I can only surmise that both of them were executed: Paul as the man on trial, and Luke as his constant companion and supporter. In any case, that would mean that Luke was Paul's constant companion and friend for the last five years of their lives. Others, we are told, deserted Paul as the circumstances grew more and more scary. (II Timothy 4:16) But Luke never did. Jesus died without a friend who stayed with Him. But Paul at least had one friend who would not desert him.

Finally, I want to mention a few of the teachings and parables that we have in the New Testament because of Luke. That is, if they had not been written for us in Luke's Gospel, we never would have heard of them. They appear nowhere else. (And this is not a complete list, by the way, just some of my top favorites.)

Luke 7:36-50

The woman who kisses Jesus' feet and anoints them with oil at Simon's dinner, where we learn that "*he who is forgiven little, loves little.*" A brilliant and lucid story. Luke is the best storyteller in the New Testament.

Luke 10:29-37

The parable of the Good Samaritan. You may have heard of it. By the way, Mark and Matthew never mention Samaritans. Well, Matthew uses the name once to say "*do not enter any Samaritan town.*"

Luke 10:38-42

The story of Mary and Martha, where Martha tries to get Mary into trouble for not helping her with the meal.

Luke 12:13-21

The parable of the Rich Fool, the guy who builds bigger barns to store his goods but is told, "*This very night your soul will be required of you.*"

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Luke 14:7-14

Take a lower seat at the banquet table (maybe they will ask you to move up, but at least they will not ask you to move down), and do not invite those who have the means to invite you back.

Luke 15:11-32

The parable of the Prodigal Son (almost pure Gospel).

Luke 16:1-13

The parable of the Unjust Steward (pure Gospel).

Luke 17:7-10

"We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty." In the Kingdom of God, there is no way to work for extra credit. Lots of us have not figured that out even yet.

Luke 17:11-19

Jesus heals ten lepers; only one returns to thank him – a Samaritan.

Luke 17:20-21

"The kingdom of God is in the midst of you." (Our "Call to Worship" this morning.) Where the King is, that is where the Kingdom is.

Luke 18:1-8

The parable of the Unjust Judge – *"keep on praying and never lose heart."* Not a very good story, in my opinion, but I need the message so badly that it doesn't matter.

Luke 19:1-10

The story of Zacchaeus.

Luke 19:39-44

"If my followers were silent, the very stones would cry out." And then Jesus weeps over Jerusalem because it does not know the ways of peace.

Luke 20:27-38

An argument with the Sadducees. The Sadducees do not believe in resurrection, so they posit this story about a woman who had seven husbands and, laughing and mocking, wonder who will get her as a wife when it comes to the next realm. Jesus replies, *“God is not God of the dead, but of the living. In God’s sight, all are alive.”* (Here endeth a lot of apocalyptic blunders and errors. We are *not* sitting around in the grave waiting for the Second Coming – as reiterated in the stories of the Transfiguration, the thief on the cross, the Resurrection itself, and Pentecost – even though that waiting-around scenario hangs on to the church all these generations later.)

Luke 23:39-43

The thief on the cross. *“This day you will be with me in Paradise.”* Without any of the “credentials” we have been taught are necessary, this guy makes it into Paradise: not baptized; no confession of faith; no record of good deeds; does not belong to any church; does not love his neighbor; does not give to the poor or feed the hungry. But he makes it. Possibly the purest Gospel of all.

Luke 23:46

“Into thy hands I commit my spirit.” Then He breathed His last. Jesus is not rebellious or angry toward God. And contrary to many teachings, which we have no time for today, Jesus trusts God to the very end.

* * *

In any case, I love Luke for writing Acts as well as Luke, for being such a faithful friend to Paul, for being so courageous and uncompromising. But I also love Luke for telling it best and making it clearest. Not everybody likes that sort of thing, but I am endlessly grateful.