



## The Gospel of Luke

Luke 3:1-6:11: Jesus Begins to Preach and Heal

As we begin chapter three of Luke's Gospel the stage is almost set for Jesus to begin his ministry (as he will do in chapter four). Only two characters remain to be introduced, or reintroduced, before Luke can introduce Jesus' mission. The first is Jesus' most important advocate, John the Baptist. The second is his most significant opponent, Satan.

Each of our four canonical gospels suggests that we can only deal with Jesus by dealing with John the Baptist. The description of his ministry shifts somewhat from gospel to gospel, the fourth gospel, as usual, being most significantly different from the others. In each gospel the baptizer fulfills two important functions. He connects Jesus to God's history with Israel, as recorded in the Old Testament, and he bears witness to Jesus' significance as representative of God or of God's reign.

Luke, because he is concerned with God's activity in all of human history, stresses John's (and Jesus') chronological location in relationship to emperors, governors, and high priests. Because he is concerned with God's activity as declared in the Old Testament, he is eager to tie John's words to the prophecy found in the book of Isaiah.

John warns that genealogy is no guarantee of salvation. That the people claim Abraham as their father is not sufficient response to God's inbreaking power. What is required is repentance and amendment of life. The amendment of life is spelled out more practically—perhaps more modestly—in Luke than in Mark and Matthew. There are concrete actions that people can take in the context of the lives they now live. Tax collectors are not told to give up tax collecting, but to do their job fairly, for example.

What counts is not just repentance but the fruits of repentance—what do people do with the penitence they profess?

It is easy to think of Luke as presenting a contrast between the harsh eschatological words of John the Baptist and the comforting words of Jesus, but Luke alone reports that John and Jesus are cousins. They are also related in word as well as in blood. The strong message of repentance and judgment that we find in John will find its own echoes and emphases in Jesus' own preaching. "His winnowing fork is in his hand." (3:17)

When Luke portrays John baptizing Jesus he highlights again the lines of continuity between the two. When the voice comes from heaven saying to Jesus: “You are my son” (See Isa 42:1; Ps 2:7), we see an even stronger link, between Jesus and the one he calls Father.

John prepares for Jesus’ mission; Satan seeks to thwart it. The Holy Spirit is a major actor both in the Gospel of Luke and in the Book of Acts. The Spirit, which descends on Jesus at his baptism, now drives him into the wilderness, where Jesus and the Spirit do battle against another spiritual force—Satan.

The three tests Jesus faces in the wilderness are the same three he faces in Matt 4:1- 11, though the order of the tests is different. In each case Jesus outfoxes Satan by proving to be a better scriptural interpreter. More deeply, Jesus outlasts Satan by proving his own fidelity to his mission, his call.

#### The Sermon in Nazareth

Now the prologue is over. Jesus’ work begins (4:14). As Luke explicitly uses the Book of Isaiah to describe John the Baptist’s ministry, Jesus explicitly uses the Book of Isaiah to inaugurate his own ministry. Again, the passage stresses both continuity and newness. Jesus is both the greatest of prophets and more than a prophet.

The continuity is evident when Jesus returns to his home town, his home synagogue, and familiar scripture. The newness is evident when Jesus uses the scripture as a description of himself and his own mission. You will see in Sharon Ringe’s book that the text Jesus quotes originally referred to the Jubilee justice that God would work for Israel. Now, astonishingly, Jesus claims that the promises of God evidenced in the rules for a jubilee observance have come to pass—in him. As in his baptism, temptation, and return to Nazareth, all this is the work of God’s Spirit.

We notice how much continuity there is between the Isaiah passage Jesus reads and the hymn Mary sings in Luke 1. What God is up to in Luke’s Gospel is not only individual forgiveness but historical, political, social, economic redemption.

The annoyance of the neighbors is not because Jesus sounds presumptuous. Their annoyance is that he does not promise to start his redemptive ministry by doing miracles at home.

Satan’s tests now turn into the people’s opposition. For the rest of the Gospel we will most often see Satan’s work in the opposition Jesus faced from human beings. That opposition will reach its peak in the crucifixion, and it may be that when Luke tells us that Jesus walks right through the crowd, he may be hinting that one day, Jesus will walk right through death to Resurrection.

Sharon Ringe suggests that the passage that follows the synagogue scene can be titled: “The Good News Enacted: Luke 4:31-44.” We can say that the rest of chapter four of Luke’s Gospel and all of chapter five represent the good news enacted. Like the classical prophets of I and II Kings Jesus works out the redemption he declares.

We also see Jesus recruiting, commissioning for the good news, when he starts with Peter and calls other to follow him. (In Acts, these apostles, too, will enact the gospel they declare). With the healing of the paralytic in Luke 5:17-26 and the calling of a tax collector in Luke 5:27-31 we learn this about the jubilee gospel God enacts: the gospel is a gospel of forgiveness, and those whom Jesus forgives he often also calls, to be servants of that same good news.

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