

Spotlight On Luke

by Staff

Forerunner, February 2001

What would the New Testament be like without the contributions of Luke, "the beloved physician"? Most do not realize that he penned almost as much of the New Testament as the apostle Paul! Paul wrote more epistles—fourteen in all—but Luke wrote nearly as many words in his two books: Acts and the gospel of Luke.

Ironically, Luke is mentioned only three times by name, and each of those times was by the apostle Paul (Colossians 4:12; II Timothy 4:11; Philemon 1:24). Luke never mentions his own name in his gospel account, in which he does not appear, or in Acts, in which he plays a major role. The other gospels were written by eyewitnesses (Matthew, Mark, and John) to the events they record. Luke admits in the first verses of his account that he was not an eyewitness of the life of Christ, but carefully records what eyewitnesses reported to him and others (Luke 1:1-4).

We actually know very little about Luke the man, and that just adds to the fascination about this great and humble person. He no doubt wanted it that way. He probably would not have liked the title of this article because every indication we have suggests he shunned the spotlight. In his view, what he wrote was never about him but about Christ or what Christ did through others.

Even though the Bible says little about Luke directly, we can put together a few pieces of the puzzle and assemble a fascinating portrait of this great writer and Christian.

Luke's Life

Just as we do today, it was common practice in apostolic days to shorten names. Luke (or Lukas) is an abbreviation of the Gentile name Loukanos, which means "white." Though it is not certain, some scholars believe that he and Titus were brothers, based on II Corinthians 8:18. So little is known about him that no one can positively state where he made his home, but most scholars feel it was in Philippi.

In the biblical narrative, Luke appears suddenly but unobtrusively among Paul's companions in Troas. Acts 16:8-11 is written in such a way that the language changes from the third-person singular, "he," speaking of Paul alone, to the first-person plural, "we," when Luke joins in after he met Paul in Troas, possibly for the first time.

In Colossians 4:9-14, Luke is not included among those "of the circumcision" (verse 11), but along with Epaphras and Demas forms a group of Gentiles who assisted Paul in his travels and work. Many early Christian writers assert that Luke was converted directly from paganism, though others thought him to be a convert to Judaism, a Jewish proselyte.

We can also learn something about people by their writing styles. Luke is clearly a highly educated individual. As a physician, he would have studied a great deal more than medicine, including philosophy and classical literature. Bible commentators report Luke has the best command of the Greek language of any New Testament writer. Only the Greek in the book of Hebrews approaches the quality of Luke's writing.

Commentators call the gospel of Luke, "a work of high literary quality" (*Unger's Bible Dictionary*). One scholar viewed Luke's gospel as "the most beautiful book that has ever been written. The subject matter as well as the author's literary talent combine to give the book an interesting appeal and polish conspicuous in the New Testament."

The Beloved Physician

Luke's immediate service to God's people comes as Paul's personal "beloved physician" (Colossians 4:14). Remember, Paul frequently needed a doctor's ministrations! After all, even Jesus says that the sick *need* a physician (Luke 5:31). According to his own testimony in II Corinthians 11:23-28, Paul relates how often he was beaten, whipped "above measure" and/or imprisoned. He goes on to say he was once stoned and left for dead. We could also add to this list being shipwrecked three times and Paul's consequent exposure. One time he spent a whole night and a day trying not to drown (II Corinthians 11:25). No doubt, Luke's trained hands and caring presence helped Paul recover from many of these severe beatings, open wounds and infections.

No wonder Paul calls Luke the "beloved" physician! Certainly, God used Luke to help prolong Paul's life and perhaps even to help him recover from serious illnesses. Luke may also have attended to Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (II Corinthians 12:7) and his illness while among the Galatians (Galatians 4:13-14).

Luke's later years are spent in Paul's company away from Philippi: on the way to Jerusalem, at Caesarea, during the voyage to Rome and of course in Rome itself. He is with Paul in Rome as he writes Colossians and Philemon. Luke is not only a physician to Paul, but he also becomes his personal assistant and secretary.

We also know that during Paul's second Roman imprisonment, Luke is Paul's sole companion for a time. Note what Paul asks Timothy, in II Timothy 4:9-12:

Be diligent to come to me quickly; for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica—Crescens for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia.
Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry. And Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus.

This is the last letter of Paul that we have any record of today, and it is probably his last. He is "already being poured out as a drink offering" (verse 6). He could have felt totally abandoned by his human friends—except for Luke's presence. Luke's devotion to Paul during this dangerous time is nothing short of beautiful and inspiring. Paul, though a deeply converted man of faith, is also human and appreciates having a companion who never gives up and never leaves him. Luke is truly a "God-send" for Paul in his darkest hours before his execution.

In his rare "spare" moments, Luke assembles the stories he hears repeatedly about Christ, and writes his own gospel account, as well as the Acts of the Apostles later. It is possible that Luke pens his gospel during Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea. Commentators describe his writing as painting with word pictures. Some have even speculated that Luke could have been an artist, as his writing is so vivid, so colorful, so fluid (for example, Acts 23:12-22).

As mentioned earlier, Luke never mentions himself by name even once in Acts, though he was obviously a witness to many of the events. The closest he comes is to say "we" in several places

(Acts 16:10-17; 20:6-16; 21:27-28). These sections have vivid descriptions only an eyewitness could portray.

We also see medical detail in Luke's writings. In Acts 28:8, Luke reports that Publius' father "lay sick of a fever and dysentery." This physician also humbly records in Luke 8:43 that no physician could heal the woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years. What does he do in this case? He shines the spotlight on the true Healer, Jesus Christ.

Jesus' Humanity

Luke's focus in his gospel account is on Christ the Man. This approach contrasts with Matthew's emphasis on Christ the King; Mark's, on Christ the Servant; and John's, on Christ the Son of God. As a Gentile, Luke's great appreciation for Jesus' sacrifice for all men—Jew and Gentile alike—comes out in his depiction of the life of Christ. He is not just the Savior of the sons of Abraham but all the sons of Adam.

Along with Matthew, Luke commonly uses the term "Son of Man" in reference to Jesus. He provides detailed accounts of Christ's birth, infancy and childhood to illustrate that he was born, grew and matured like any other human. He shows Jesus doing things the rest of humanity does all the time: learning, eating, sleeping, weeping and giving comfort. Even His parables, as described by Luke, have a very human touch. Many feel Luke's gospel account is the most interesting one to read, as he focuses on the needy and troubled people as they come in contact with Christ the Man.

Luke chronicles events not found in the other gospel accounts. For example, Luke records five great exclamations of singing: Elizabeth's thanksgiving, Mary's joyous praise of God, Zechariah's exuberant prophecy, the angels' annunciation of Christ's birth to the shepherds, and Simeon's verse of appreciation for living to see the Messiah. As Merrill Unger writes, Luke's "gospel is emphatically 'good news of a great joy.'"

From all this we know that Luke is a humble Gentile, who comes to know and love his Savior intimately. He finds it an honor to serve a great apostle, Paul, and prefers to keep the spotlight on others—and off himself. We find him unafraid in his devotion to stand by Paul, when others are getting out while they can. Evident in his writings is a constant awareness of God's providence for His servants, an awareness that reveals itself in his vignettes that show God's care and love for the sick and needy.

He is a great gospel writer, for he knows his subject, the Christ, in a very personal way, though he never had the opportunity to meet Him firsthand. Nonetheless, His stories are full of vivid details, evidence of his drive to allow the reader to be able to experience rather than merely read. He wants his readers to come to know the Savior just as deeply as he has.

No one knows for sure how Luke's life ended. We know he was not martyred with Paul in Rome since he wrote the book of Acts long after that terrible moment. No one knows whether he was martyred later or died a natural death. Regardless, Luke's work lives on, inspiring us today, almost 2,000 years later. Thank God for Luke, the beloved physician.