

Using God's Irrevocable Gifts For His Glory

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Please turn with me to Luke 1. We will pick it up right there in the beginning of the chapter. Luke writes:

Luke 1:1-4 Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know with certainty of those things in which you were instructed.

In a minute we are going to read the same verses from The Message version of the Bible, because I very much like how they bring the simplicity, clarity, and power of the beginning of Luke's carefully written account of Jesus Christ's life as a human being.

Of course we know that the gospels all present the incredible account of God's work through Jesus Christ from different perspectives. Matthew presents Him from the perspective of Jesus Christ as King of kings. Mark presents from the perspective of Jesus Christ as the consummate Servant. And John presents from the perspective of Jesus as Emmanuel, God with us, while Luke presents from the perspective of Christ as a man, the perfect Man, presented within the context of relationships and especially within His family.

With this in mind, this is the way the Message Bible paraphrases these verses:

Luke 1:1-4 (Message) So many others have tried their hand at putting together a story of the wonderful harvest of Scripture and history that took place among us, using reports handed down by the original eyewitnesses who served this word with their very lives.

Since I have investigated all the reports in close detail, starting from the story's beginning, I decided to write it all out for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can know beyond the shadow of a doubt the reliability of what you were taught.

Luke begins to give the account like an investigative journalist, looking into the man and His family while considering what the people thought from a human perspective about what was happening as the events took place. Well, Luke's fastidiously collected memoir is what I think a very fine lesson of life that we should be considering ourselves over the next few months as we approach the Passover in self-examination.

Please turn with me to Romans 12. I will be picking that up right in the beginning of the chapter as well. Paul writes:

Romans 12:1-3 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt each one a measure of faith.

It is good to keep this in context, because Paul begins the wrap up of his letter to the church of Rome in this chapter after making it clear in the previous chapter that God's plan and purpose is moving forward exactly as He is determined, and what may seem like a change in plans. God's plan never changes. Drop back a few verses to chapter 11, verse 29, where we read, as it is written in the New King James:

Romans 11:29 For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Brethren, it is vital that we consider this verse before proceeding. The apostle had just gone to great lengths to explain the sovereignty of God as it relates to who God determines to set apart as holy unto Him. In this he gives another indication that there is no Plan B. We just do not really grasp the

extent of how great our God is and the immense plan that has always been totally under His control to accomplish His purpose to expand His Family.

That word translated as irrevocable in the New King James Version is translated as "without repentance" in the King James. For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance. In *Strong's*, the word is *ametameletos*, quite a mouthful. And it means without repentance, not to be repented of, not to change, irrevocable. Brethren, God's carefully determined plan does not change, nor are the gifts He gives to move that plan forward revocable. He will never change.

The only wild cards in the system are you and me, because God has given each of us free moral agency. But He has also given the ability and strength to use what He has given within the pressure cooker of this world to overcome our own carnal nature if we stay firmly committed to the plan, learning to live by every word of God.

At this point, I would like to lay a bit of groundwork that has been on my mind regarding the specific use of Luke, a Gentile, to write at least 27.5% of the New Testament, if not more, which we will get to in a minute. Although this will take up most of the rest of the sermon, it is not what I originally intended. But I think we are going to see some things here that should both encourage each of us going forward and help us to prepare for the Passover.

There is a bit of a division among scholars regarding who Luke actually was, because there is so little information about him. He almost seems to be purposely hiding himself, keeping the focus on the real Author and not on the scribe. Though some argue the point, most seem to agree that this is the same Luke referenced by name three times by the apostle Paul as his consistent companion in preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. I believe this is the correct approach, and it is this thought that we will continue to move forward with.

Let us turn to those scriptures because, although they are only a few words, I feel when you consider them along with the magnificent way in which Luke wrote, we may see an important clue to what God was doing with him in making the way of Jesus Christ clear to all Christians, Jew and Gentile. We will read the three scriptures where Paul names Luke specifically, and then

we will be turning to a place in Acts where Luke identifies himself. First, turn with me to Colossians 4, please. We will pick it up in verse 7. Paul writes:

Colossians 4:7-14 Tychicus, a beloved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts, with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will make known to you all things which are happening here. Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark, the cousin of Barnabas (about whom he received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him), and Jesus who was called Justus. These are my only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are of the circumcision; they have proved to be a comfort to me. Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis. Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you.

Now turn with me to Philemon, please. Philemon, one chapter, so it is verse 24 in Philemon. We will pick it up in verse 23.

Philemon 23-25 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

And then turn with me back a couple of pages to II Timothy chapter 4, and we will pick it up in verse 9.

II Timothy 4:9-11 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. [He is talking to Timothy.] Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry.

The last one is critical. It seems that it was only Luke who remained so close to Paul, even though he too probably had moments that he pulled back in fear because of Paul's aggressiveness and the way Paul treated things. We all can understand the courage it would take to do what Paul did, and Luke there with him.

Now, keeping in mind, as we all know, that Luke wrote Acts of the Apostles, please turn with me to a place where we can see Luke inconspicuously identifying himself. Turn with me to Acts the 16th chapter, please, and we will be picking this up right in the first verse as well.

Acts 16:1-5 Then he came to Derbe and Lystra. [This is Luke giving the account of Paul's travels, and he says there specifically he came to Derbe and Lystra.] And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek. He was well spoken of by the brethren who were at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted to have him go with him. And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek. And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily.

It is interesting to think here that it seems that Luke knew very well what had been going on before the council at Jerusalem. Continuing now in verse 6:

Acts 16:6-13 Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man from Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them. Therefore, sailing from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and the next day came to Neapolis, and from there to

Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a colony. And we were staying in that city for some days. And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made, and we sat down and spoke to the women who met us there.

In the Amplified Bible, it is even more specific in verse 10, where it reads:

Acts 16:10 (AMPC) And when he had seen the vision, we (including Luke), at once devoutly endeavored to go on into Macedonia, confidently inferring that God had called us to proclaim the glad tidings (Gospel) to them.

It is important to note at this point that not only was Luke referred to as the beloved physician and Paul's constant companion (everyone else had left him), but as I said, Luke inconspicuously notes another job that God had given this Gentile among the Jews to do in preaching the good news of the gospel of the Kingdom of God through Jesus Christ.

I do not know at what point in Paul's travels Luke had become a devoted follower of Jesus Christ by the preaching of Paul. My own opinion is that it was early on, possibly in his first journey, and like you and me, he had been growing in faith with the irrevocable gifts that God had given him. But it was at Troas, on Paul's second journey, that he seems to have become one of Paul's constant companions in spreading the gospel, and perhaps even more importantly, learning through close association with someone with similar gifts of mind to understand the difficult things to understand, in a way that he could later write with clarity to Jew and Gentile alike about Jesus Christ's magnificent work.

It has also been noted by scholars and commentators who have recognized such things that Luke's writings, in organization and style, make the book of Luke the most beautifully written book of the Bible, with only the book of Hebrews close to it. This brings me back to what I had said earlier, that at least 27.5% of the New Testament had been written by this Gentile. My personal opinion is that Luke wrote the book of Hebrews, expressing the awesome life of Jesus Christ, who was better than anyone or anything within the creation.

Please understand, I am not questioning Paul as being the author of the book of Hebrews under the inspiration of Jesus Christ, but my personal opinion is that God had Luke write the book in this magnificently beautiful style that would clearly appeal to Gentiles. His time with Paul gave him the unique grasp of those hard-to-understand things that are difficult to understand of Jesus Christ as the linchpin of grace and law and the bridging of the gap between physical Israel and spiritual Israel.

I think we can look at this in the same way we may view the work of a fine, very good editor. The best editors polish a work to enhance its readability without removing the voice of the author from the edition. The apostle Paul's voice, under the direction of God's Holy Spirit, is clearly running through the book of Hebrews, but the style of writing, from what I understand, is much more in line with Luke.

As we go forward, I would like for you to consider these few points. 1) Luke, as the beloved physician, was Paul's almost constant companion, learning, living, and preaching the truth of the Kingdom of God and Jesus Christ in service to Paul, probably tending to his wounds, persevering under some of the most difficult of conditions. 2) he was an eyewitness to the persecution by Gentiles and Jews alike who were trying to distort or destroy the truth of Jesus Christ and continue on in the traditions of men, and what the apostles had determined to faithfully do to deal with this. 3) he very possibly found himself subject to the same trials as Paul, and at the very least was constantly tending to Paul's physical needs, as I said.

In their journey and trials together, it is possible that this obviously intelligent Gentile, of some rank and privilege, in humility became well enough equipped to share those things of Paul that the apostle Peter had said were so hard but necessary for the church, and they were of great value, as Peter expressed in II Peter 3:16.

Now let us consider what Luke may have shared with Paul to prepare him to use God's irrevocable gifts to him, to write down what he did, the very conditions he may have been under. Turn with me to II Corinthians 11. And I want you to think about this, not just Paul going through this, but Luke along with him. We will pick it up in verse 24. This is Paul speaking:

II Corinthians 11:24-33 From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil and sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation? If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.

How much of this, not all of it, but how much of this did Luke actually experience with Paul himself in order to be better prepared by God to write perhaps almost one-third of the New Testament to show Gentiles that the Man, Jesus Christ, was not an insurrectionist or a mere criminal, but better than anyone or anything in His creation? How much did he do to use his irrevocable gifts to add clarity to the things of Paul that were hard to understand for Gentile and Jew alike, in order to hold on to the grace and truth that were only through Jesus Christ, as John wrote in John 1:17?

Brethren, consider this in terms of your own gifts that God has certainly given you as you go forward through the trials of life. God's plan and His gifts are irrevocable, if you will submit to Him in humility through all the events of life, even though you cannot see the long game that God is working to accomplish for those who are humble and tremble at His Word, as we see in Isaiah 66:1-2: "But on this one will I look."

Continuing now with Luke. In both his introduction to the book of Luke and to the Acts of the Apostles, Luke addresses both volumes to Theophilus. We

already read what it said in Luke 1:1-4, so please turn with me now to Acts 1, and we will be picking this up in verse 1. We need to pick up a couple of things here. As we are going forward in the next few minutes, we will segue into what was originally my main focus of the sermon before I started to consider Luke's own diligent effort to use God's irrevocable gifts to accomplish His purpose.

Acts 1:1-8 The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began [he is talking about the account he made in the original book of Luke] both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commands to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, "which," He said, "you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" And He said to them, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Before going any farther, please notice that Luke immediately put an end to any idea of Christ and His disciples having any intent to overthrow the governments of this world. His disciples were to be living witnesses of Him and the Kingdom of God.

Now notice, both books, both volumes, are written to the same person, Theophilus. Some commentators have considered this simply a substitutionary name for all those who have been called to Jesus Christ. However, most commentators agree that the evidence seems to support the

idea that this was a Gentile person of rank and a Christian, as the meaning of his name, friend of God or lover of God, implies. But again, they are divided on this.

Luke, in great detail, explained how Jesus Christ embodied grace and truth unlike any other man who ever lived. Luke carefully showed His humanity, with family and an unbroken lineage all the way back to Adam. Luke also detailed the exemplary work of those who faithfully followed Him under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit. God had given Luke gifts to be used for God's glory, in the time He saw fit, to add another dimension to Jesus Christ and His work.

Luke learned both from Peter and Paul, who are the main focus of Acts—possibly from Peter through his close association with Mark, who we probably know was likely the source for Mark in the gospel of Mark. God gave Luke the gifts to add some additional clarity for Jew and Gentile alike, of those things that would be hard to understand from merely a Gentile or merely a Hebrew perspective, regarding God's perfect plan through Jesus Christ to bring all men into His Family. But Luke had to faithfully endure many trials to do it, just like you and me.

Back to Theophilus. Commentators also stated that this, as I said, was a particular Gentile of rank, as seen in Luke's opening salutation, addressing him in the book of Luke as most excellent, a title Luke used when referring to Felix and Festus in Paul's interactions with them in Acts 23 and 24. While most commentators agree that this was an actual high-ranking official, probably a high-ranking Roman official, there is some interesting disagreement over the purpose of Luke's carefully organized account to him.

Some say, as mentioned, Theophilus was a high-ranking Roman follower of Christ, while others claim that Luke was literally using his very detailed accounts to put to bed the idea that Jesus Christ and His followers were insurrectionists intent on overthrowing Caesar. They thought this high-ranking official was not a Christian at all, but one who had been sent directly from Rome to do an investigation. I personally do not believe this, although you can imagine, from just the day and age in which we live, that there were probably rumors flying all over the Roman Empire that were even possibly causing the disciples of Christ to think His return as King of kings was

imminent, because they were not seeing the big picture, as we noted in the very beginning of the book of Acts.

Just as Luke was being prepared to move to the next stage in writing to make Paul's hard-to-understand message about Jesus Christ more easily understood by Jew and Gentile alike, through the great pressure he faithfully endured with Paul, each one of us has been given gifts that only develop under great pressure, no matter how seemingly insignificant the gift. This is why our focus needs to continue beyond the things of this world and on our citizenship in the Kingdom of God. We must keep looking at things from God's perspective, and not the very limited perspective of our physical circumstances.

With that in mind, please turn with me, if you will, to Acts 17, where we are going to consider just what kind of impact the work of Jesus Christ has now on each person's irrevocable gifts, no matter how small they may be, in trust of God. We will start there again right in the beginning of the chapter.

Acts 17:1-9 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. Then Paul, as was his custom, went in among them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ." And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas. But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus." And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

Brethren, you, like Luke and Jason, have been given irrevocable gifts to be used in faith and trust within the perfect plan of God, that is turning the world upside down. Jason had a gift of hospitality that was very costly to him. It will always be very costly, just as it was for Jason here. But God's plan is on course and will work out just as He has determined.

We must keep our focus on the Kingdom of God, knowing that each of us has been given irrevocable gifts to be used in faith for the glory of God, in the way that He has determined to perfectly fit all the pieces together exactly as He sees them from His perspective, and when He is fully prepared for you to be used. Brethren, whether big or small, all are part of a holy people who are turning the world upside down, used by God to have a part in His perfect plan moving forward. It will cause trouble and trials now, but it is not unnoticed by our great God, as He looks on those who are humble and tremble at His Word, keeping on with our focus on Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God.

I really intended for this sermon to look into the family connections of Jesus Christ detailed by Luke and the way they all faithfully used their irrevocable gifts. Perhaps that will be on another day. But for now, I think that God has shown us a good enough example for today from this inconspicuous Gentile whom He prepared to detail Jesus Christ and His holy people's work that is turning the world upside down.

Brethren, this Gentile Luke wrote perhaps almost one-third of the New Testament with the irrevocable gifts God had given him, perfected through great trial and tribulation with the apostle Paul, so that we can more clearly see Jesus Christ and the perfect plan that God will accomplish exactly as He has purposed.

Let us begin to wrap this up back in the book of Romans, and some of those hard things to understand from the apostle Paul that Luke could expand on in detailed accounts of the most perfect Man that ever lived, and the work of His disciples for the glory of God's perfect plan for all mankind. Romans 11, starting in verse 25.

Romans 11:25-36 For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins." Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For as you were once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their disobedience, even so these also have now been disobedient, that through the mercy shown you they also may obtain mercy. For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all. Oh, the depths of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?" "Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to Him?" For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever.

And now, brethren, for a final scripture, please turn with me back to Romans 8. We will pick it up in verse 35.

Romans 8:35-39 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Will we be able to say with Paul, Luke, Jason, and all of God's elect, that we have used the irrevocable gifts of God to the fullest, and in service to our great God, within a world turned upside down by the better way of Jesus Christ? Who can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, the perfect Man, who is better than anyone or anything who ever existed within His creation?

It is good that we think on these things as we approach the Passover. How well are we using God's irrevocable gifts humbly and for His glory, even within the most difficult times, because we can see not from a Hebrew or a Gentile perspective, but from God's perspective, who has determined the end from the beginning.