

## January 1 Lesson

Let me begin by saying, Happy New Year! Today is the first day of a year-long journey of reading (listening to God), thinking and praying (talking to God) through the NT. Today we read the beginning of the gospels of Luke and John. Let's talk for a moment about who these men were. We'll start with Luke...

Now, I'm not sure if you noticed this, but the Gospel of Luke doesn't say who the author is. It just starts out with, "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative...it seemed good to me also...to write an orderly account..." So how do we know that Luke wrote this letter?

Well, first, there is a clue in the writing itself; we call that *internal evidence*—that's evidence which is found within the source document. And we find that clue in the book of Acts. Acts is a continuation of the narrative of Luke (Acts 1:1), so both Luke and Acts were written by the same person. And in Acts, the author reveals that he was a traveling companion of Paul. You can see an example of this in Acts 16:10. Paul is on his second missionary journey and it says, "When [Paul] had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them." Now Luke, of course, was one of the people who was with Paul, but there were others too, like Silas and Timothy, so how do we know that it was Luke?

Well, we look next to tradition—the testimony of early church scholars and theologians. We call this *external evidence*—that's evidence which is found in sources other than the source document. And what we find is that all the early sources unanimously attribute the gospel to Luke. People like Justin Martyr, a Roman philosopher who converted to Christianity in the 2nd century. He said that Luke wrote a "memoir of Jesus" and noted that Luke was a follower of Paul. Irenaeus [ear-ih-nayus] of Lyon, a leading Christian theologian in the 2nd century. He said that the gospel was written by Luke, and he also pointed out how the "we" sections in Acts suggest this connection. Eusebius [you-see-bee-us] of Caesarea. Eusebius was a 4<sup>th</sup> century Christian scholar, and he said in his *Ecclesiastical History*, "Luke, who was by race an Antiochian and by profession a physician, had long been a companion of Paul, and had more than a casual acquaintance with the rest of the Apostles. He has left us in two inspired books...namely, the Gospel...and the Acts of the Apostles..."

So, we have good reason to believe that Luke wrote both the gospel which bears his name as well as the book of Acts. Now, what else do we know about Luke? Well, we know that he was a doctor, because Paul called him "the beloved physician" in Col 4:14. And, depending on how you interpret Col 4:11, Luke was also a Gentile (which would make him the only Gentile author of Scripture). Beyond that, we really don't know much about him. There is a rather interesting legend that Luke was a painter, and he even became the patron saint of the Guild of Saint Luke, which was the common name of local painters' guilds in the middle ages.

That brings us now to the recipient of the letter, the Theophilus that Luke was writing to. Who was Theophilus? Well, the name itself is interesting; it's made up of two words, *theos* which means 'God' and *philos* which means 'friend.' So Theophilus means "friend of God." Now, you might wonder if this is an actual name or some kind of title, but it turns out that Theophilus was a common name—we find it in letters and inscriptions as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, so this appears to be a real name.

Luke addressed him as the "most excellent" Theophilus, so it seems he was a person of some wealth and social standing. Luke used this same adjective when speaking of the Roman governors Felix and Festus, and this has led some people to think that Theophilus may have been a Roman official or provincial governor, but we don't know for sure. Most commentators agree that Theophilus was a Gentile of wealth and prominence who had converted to Christianity. Also, the many quotes in Luke from the OT suggest that he had a background with the Jewish culture.

Now, Theophilus was likely eager to learn more about Jesus and the Gospel, and he may have had certain questions or doubts that Luke wanted to address. Luke says that there were “many” accounts of Jesus’ life, and he also says that he wanted Theophilus to have “certainty” about what he had been taught, so it’s likely that there were contradictions and discrepancies and other issues out there that Luke wanted to clear up. *He wanted Theophilus to know that his faith in Jesus rested on verified historical fact, unlike the mythology surrounding the Greco-Roman religions.* Because of this, Theophilus could have full confidence in the truth of the message, and he could then proclaim it with boldness. And the same goes for us today! We can have certainty in the accuracy and truth of the gospel we share with others.

You’ll notice that as Luke tells Theophilus about Jesus, he emphasizes *the humanity of Jesus* (this makes sense since Theophilus was a Gentile). How does he do this? Well, Luke traces Jesus’ genealogy all the way back to Adam, showing that Jesus was truly human, and he presents Jesus as the Son of Man who, though rejected by the Jews, had come to save all mankind. Luke also shows a special interest in women (1-2; 8:1-3; 10:38-42; 23:27-28), the poor (7:11-13; 14:12-14; 16:19-31; 21:1-4), and children (2:39-52; 9:46-48; 18:15-17).<sup>1</sup> For Luke, Jesus truly was the savior of the world.

Now, before we leave the Gospel of Luke, let me give you two final thoughts. First, the word *gospel* means “good news,” and since the first four books of the NT (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) all tell us about Jesus, it’s appropriate that they are called gospels. Second, Matthew, Mark and Luke are called *synoptic* gospels (*syn* = ‘together’ and *optic* = ‘seeing’) because they are so similar in structure, content and wording. You can easily set them side by side to create a comparison of the wording. A good example of this is the account of John the Baptist—here you can see how close the texts are to each other.

OK, that brings us to John. Just like Luke, the Gospel of John doesn’t tell us who the author is. So, again, we use clues in the document itself (internal evidence) and the testimony of tradition (external evidence) to determine the author.

Internal evidence: the author identifies himself as “the disciple Jesus loved” (21:20, 24). This phrase first appears in John 13:23 at the Last Supper where only the Twelve are gathered (Matt 26:20; Mark 14:17; Luke 22:14), indicating that he must have been one of the Twelve. Since the author never refers to himself by name, he can’t be any of the named disciples at the Last Supper: that eliminates Judas Iscariot (13:2, 26-27), Peter (13:6-9), Thomas (14:5), Philip (14:8-9), and Judas the son of James (14:22). If you continue this process of elimination, you eventually get down to a short list, with John the son of Zebedee as a strong possibility.

External evidence: Irenaeus attributed John’s Gospel to John the son of Zebedee: “John the disciple of the Lord, who leaned back on his breast, published the Gospel while he was a resident at Ephesus in Asia” (Haer. 3.1.2). Eusebius, the historian, records that Clement of Alexandria concurred: “John, last of all ... composed a spiritual Gospel” (Eccl. Hist. 6.14.7). This tradition, combined with the internal evidence, led the church to unanimously attribute the authorship to the apostle John, the son of Zebedee.

Now, John doesn’t say who he’s writing to, so that brings us to his purpose—why did John write his Gospel? Well, John tells us the answer at the very end: “These [signs] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). So John has both an evangelistic purpose—he wants unbelievers to read and be converted—and an edifying purpose—he wants believers to be confirmed and encouraged in the faith. And what are these signs? The signs are *miracles that Jesus performed* (e.g., turning water into wine, feeding the 5,000, raising Lazarus from the dead). John records seven of these signs (the number of perfection) and this is why the first part of John (2-11) is sometimes called the Book of Signs.

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<sup>1</sup> H. L. Willmington, *Willmington’s Bible Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1997), 578.

In closing, I want to focus on what the preface to John's gospel teaches us about Jesus. First (1:1-3), John tells us that "In the beginning was the Word." Now, we use words to communicate, and Jesus is the Word, the supreme and final way that God the Father has chosen to express himself to us. The phrase "In the beginning" connects Jesus to the speaking of God in creation (the many times "God said" in Genesis 1). John also tells us that the Word was "with God"—he is a separate person within the Trinity, and the Word "was God"—he and God are one in *essence*. John concludes: "All things were made through Him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." From the very beginning of his gospel, John wants us to understand that Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, God-of-very-God, uncreated and eternal, the creator of all things. As Paul later said, "For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him" (Col 1:16).

Second (1:4-5), John tells us that life is found "in" Jesus. This life is both spiritual (being in right relationship with the Father through the Son; 17:3) and physical (even though we die, our physical bodies will be resurrected; 11:25). Jesus is the source of life, and we partake of that life by being *united with him spiritually* (John 15:4-5; 2 Cor 5:17). John went on to say that Jesus' life "was the light of men" (1:4). Just as God created physical light to shine out in the darkness (Gen 1:3), so Jesus came into the world to bring spiritual light to our spiritual darkness (Isa 9:2). John concludes: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (1:5). The word "overcome" can also mean "recognize" or "comprehend" (NASB), and both senses of the word are true here. Jesus was not recognized for who he really was, yet even when his own people rejected him, he was not defeated. Instead, he remained faithful and triumphed over the powers of darkness through the power of the Holy Spirit (Col 2:15).

Third, (1:6-8), John helps us understand the difference between Jesus and John the Baptist. John the Baptist was sent by God, but he was not God. He was sent to bear witness of the light, but he was not the light. He was the herald of the Messiah, but he was not the Messiah (1:20). John the Baptist was sent to point the way to Jesus, so that through his testimony, all might believe in Jesus as the Christ (1:7 NIV). John, who was originally a disciple of John the Baptist, wanted to make sure his readers understood this, for John the Baptist was well known to the Jews. Indeed, later on, in the years following Jesus' resurrection, many knew only of the baptism of John the Baptist (Acts 18:25; 19:1-7).

Fourth (1:9-13), John tells us that Jesus came to give light to everyone, not just the Jews. This light is available to all, and it demands a response. We will either reject the light and run from it, or we will embrace the light and believe in him. Tragically, Jesus came to his own people, the Jews, but they rejected him. "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (1:12). This shows us that salvation is not the result of meritorious works or the determination of man. Rather, it is the gift of the Son to those who believe in him.

Last (1:14-18), John tells us that Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, came to earth and took on a human nature ("the Word became flesh," 1:14a). Jesus is now man-of-very-man as well as God-of-very-God, one person with two natures (we'll go into more detail about this later on). John says that he "dwelt among us" or "pitched his tent" with us. Imagine—the Son of God humbled himself, not merely to come and dwell with us, but to actually become one of us! John goes on to say that Jesus was full of "grace and truth" (1:14b). This is good news indeed, for the law given through Moses, although good and holy, cannot rescue us from the darkness of sin. Instead, the law points us to Jesus, the one who can perfect our conscience and bring us into the kingdom of light. John concludes by saying that Jesus, the Son of God, "has made [the Father] known" (1:18). Jesus is the exegete, the revealer of the Father. If you want to know the Father, learn all you can of the Son, for Jesus and the Father are one (14:8-11).

How wonderful that in these last days, God has spoken to us by His Son! God appointed Him the heir of all things, and through Jesus, God created the world. He is the radiance of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's nature. Jesus upholds the universe by the word of His power, and after making purification for sins, He sat down at the Father's right hand (Heb 1:2-3). Hallelujah!