

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE – PART ONE

This gospel was one of two letters written by the same author to Theophilus.(1:3; Acts 1:1) We have no idea who he was apart from the intriguing title, ‘most excellent’. In the Roman Empire each official was addressed in a special way according to his rank in the system. ‘Most excellent’ was the correct way to greet the governor of a Roman province.(Acts 24:3; 26:25) ‘Theophilus’ in the Greek language means ‘lover of God’ and may have been a nick-name rather than his real name. As a governor who had become a Christian,, his life was always in danger. There was no point in making his position any more difficult by identifying him in a public letter.

Luke’s purpose was clear. He wanted Theophilus to know ‘the exact truth’ about Jesus.(1:4) If he was to put his life at risk by openly professing to know Jesus he needed to be sure. If Christianity was just a theory, the result of rumours or guesses, not accurate history, there was no point in sticking his neck out. The same is true today. We want to be certain about the Bible, Jesus Christ and our relationship with Him.

To achieve his purpose the writer had researched his story very carefully, looking for eye witnesses and checking their accounts against each other to be sure he had got it right.(1:2) He not only wanted his facts to be right down to the tiniest detail but he also saw it important to have events in the right order.(1:3) When compared with the other gospels the stories are not always in quite the same order because sometimes the other writers are pursuing a theme rather than just telling history. Above all his careful checking, Luke was also checking with God’s Spirit to make sure he had it exactly right.(II Tim.3:16) Contemporary history and archaeology have never shown Luke to be wrong. His example of care for detail should inspire us also.

The title ‘gospel of Luke’ is traditional. Nowhere does Luke put his name or give any indication that he was an eye witness to Jesus’ life. The only clues come in the second letter, Acts, where there are the three parts of the story written in the first person, ‘we’ and ‘us’, indicating that the writer was present.(Act 16, 20-21 and 27-28) Acts ends with Paul in Rome where he later mentions a number of friends including Luke.(Col.4:7-14; Philemon 23,24) For various reasons the letter excludes most of the list apart from Luke as the possible writer. Notice the description of Luke as ‘the beloved physician’. The writer’s careful way of describing medical problems and how people were healed would be consistent with having been written by a doctor. The starting point for being a good doctor is to take the patient’s history very carefully, as Luke does. Later still Paul writes sadly ‘Only Luke is with me.’(II Tim.4:11), suggesting that he was the loyal friend who stuck with Paul to the end.

The writer, whom we shall assume to be Luke, was the only gospel writer not to have been a Jew. He would almost certainly therefore have been Greek and so part of the other rich culture of those days. He joined Paul in Troas in Acts 16 which suggests that this was where they met and where he had been working as a doctor. He was left behind by Paul in Philippi to lead the new church there before being picked up again by Paul in

chapter 20:1-5 and taken to Israel, where he was able to do his research for both books over the two years Paul spent in prison, before they began that fateful journey to Rome. Interestingly Philippi was the site of a famous medical school in those days so he may also have had a role there in his old profession.

Chapter one is mainly taken up with two birth notices. Each one was announced beforehand by God. The two families were related but could not otherwise have been more different. John's future parents, Elizabeth and Zacharias, were old, well established and desperately wanted a son. Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph, were young, poor, engaged and definitely would not want a child yet. The stories bring back to mind Old Testament accounts like the births of Isaac, Samson and Samuel where God answered the prayers of parents who longed for children.

What is also strikingly different is how the angels' messages were received and what we can learn from each of them about God speaking to us, answered prayer and what is or is not faith.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. If you had been Theophilus, the recipient of this letter, what would you have been looking for in Luke's story? How important is it in our lives to be able to be absolutely certain that the Bible is true and that we really do belong to God for eternity?
2. How did God prepare Luke for his task of writing his two books? How does God use all our life experience to equip us for our ministry?
3. What do we know about John's parents? In what sense was this the big moment in Zacharias' life? What was he told beforehand about the son he was to have, how he was to bring him up, and what his future work was to be? How and why does God sometimes give parents a glimpse of His plan for their children? How should we respond to such insight?
4. How did Zacharias receive the news? Why did God make him dumb for a time?
5. What was different about the information the angel gave to Mary? How did she respond to what she was told? Both Zacharias and Mary questioned the angel about the message they received. What was different about the way they did it? What can we learn from their example?
6. What does the story of Elizabeth and Mary meeting while they were both pregnant tell us about God's work even in the unborn baby? How does this affect our view of abortion?
7. How does Zacharias' doubt eventually turn to faith? How did God respond once this happened? If we struggle at times with doubt how is this story an encouragement?