

PREFACE: FROM MARY NAEGELI

When asked to write a group Bible study that would cover the entire gospel of Luke in nine lessons, I immediately felt a burden of impossibility. Having taught Luke almost line-by-line in adult Bible studies and preached from its text often, I was forced to take an entirely different approach for this project. While you will judge whether we were successful, our goals for this study were these:

- expose the participant to the entire gospel, though not necessarily in chronological order,
- favor texts that are unique to Luke (there is much overlap between Luke and Matthew especially), and
- focus on themes and emphases that Luke himself brings out.

The result of my commitments to these goals is the list of nine themes, each of which is explored in its own lesson. Saying “yes” to these commitments meant saying “no” to some other potential features of a Luke Bible study:

- No, we do not cover the life of Jesus Christ in chronological order.
- No, we are not able to capture all of Jesus’ teaching.
- No, we miss some very famous events and parables, because they were not unique to Luke.



Whether your group will be studying Luke over nine months or nine weeks, we do hope that throughout your study time you will find the discipline of personal study and group discussion to so pique your curiosity that you will be ready to read the gospel straight through in preparation for Lesson Nine! By then, our hope is that the dramatic arc of the story, the strong personal impression Jesus makes, and the chosen themes will find their way into your heart.

The question has arisen often in my Bible study classes, “Why do we have four gospels instead of just one?” To answer this question, let me give you an illustration. When the stage musical *Les Misérables* first came to San Francisco, my husband, Andy, and I were lucky enough to obtain tickets. We were alerted by friends who saw it first that the story line goes very fast in the first act. They advised us to see “the movie” to get familiar with the narrative. The 1937 Charles Lawton version in black and white focused on the moral choices and dilemmas of the characters. When we returned the film, we noticed there was a full-color 1976 version, so we watched that one, too. Shot on location, this effort focused on the romances and relationships of the story. Oh wow, we wondered, that’s so different from the first one. But familiar now with the characters, we attended the musical, which seemed to highlight the political maneuvers and personal grudges. So we had to ask, “What is the real story?” To find out, Andy got the book and read all 1232 pages written by Victor Hugo. His conclusion? The story was so rich, so verbose, so multi-faceted, that no one genre could contain it all.

And that is why we have four gospels. Jesus’ life was so rich, so grand, so multi-faceted, that no one account could possibly capture everything important about him! Luke chose, as did Matthew, Mark, and John, what he would emphasize, which stories he would include, and even in some cases which order events would be presented to reinforce the message God had placed upon his heart for the world to hear. He couldn’t say everything there was to say about Jesus, but he tried to be faithful to the task. The end result is what we have as “the gospel according to Luke.”

With this humbling reminder, I acknowledge that the Bible study we offer you is another feeble rendering of a magnificent whole. I trust that you will use it as a doorway into the first century and discover the remarkable personality, purpose, and power of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Mary Holder Naegeli

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Since our goal is to become familiar with the entire gospel of Luke, this study is constructed in a way unique to our NPWL offerings of past years. Please read this guide thoroughly to prepare yourself for its joys and rigors and to understand the reasons for the choices we made.

Understand the General Structure. Each lesson includes a *personal study assignment* designed to help you, the individual learner, dig into the Luke texts appropriate to the lesson's theme, and a set of group discussion questions for your meeting. The *group discussion questions* require higher levels of thinking (such as analysis or synthesis) than the exploratory questions of the personal study. This is done to help the group use the information you have gathered on your own to identify and develop appropriate application to life. We found this to be the best method for doing justice to the book, and we hope it will enable you to get beyond information to transformation!

Embrace the Time Commitment. Be forewarned! Waiting until the night before your group meeting to do the lesson will not allow you enough time to process the material. In fact, with an average of ten paragraphs from Scripture to unpack each lesson, it would be wise to schedule several quiet times for your personal study—a good habit that will enrich your spiritual life permanently! Overall, we hope that you will spend sufficient time - perhaps several hours - to prepare your part of the study.

Take Your Shoes Off. Approach this study as though walking through a door onto white carpet. “Take your shoes off, for the place you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5). In other words, leave your preconceived notions at the door, and try to open Luke as though reading it for the first time. God wants to speak to you, and will do so through the book of Luke, if you are willing to approach in reverence and with a willingness to listen.

Focus on the Text. In this study of Luke, we will mine as much information from the text as possible. You spend time considering its impact on your faith, life, and future decisions. You will delve into the Luke text and base your answers on what you see there first. Though this is not a “line-by-line” type study, it is text based. Once you are clear on what the Word actually says, then you can go on to the “What does it mean?” and “What implications does it have for my life?” questions with confidence.

Grapple with the Questions. My aim has been to ask questions clearly, but that does not necessarily mean the answers will be clear. In fact, some of the best questions for discussion can be answered several different ways, so don't be afraid of some ambiguities or unknowns. My philosophy of question-writing is this: without giving anything away in the wording, ask questions that require a close scrutiny of the Scripture text and a thoughtful look into one's heart! When you get stuck, just mark it and keep going. You never know when some new insight will pop up, and at least you will be ready. If all else fails, bring your unresolved queries to the group; you're probably not the only one with the same question! And remember that prayer helps, too. God really does want to be known and desires this wonderful revelation to be a part of your life. So expect God's help and wisdom, which is promised to all who ask.

Having investigated everything carefully...I wrote

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY



Face the Tensions You Might Feel. Some internal tensions might build as you do this study, but persevere through them for your own spiritual growth.

- Feeling that you are not “getting it”—understandable, and absolutely no reflection on your intellect or worth. Don’t be afraid to ask questions!
- Resentment about the time it is taking you to prepare the lesson—make the choice to stretch yourself in this area, and you will be rewarded richly for the effort. You can go as far as you want with these questions, so do what you can with the time you have. If we’ve done our job right, your curiosity will build and the time factor will diminish.
- Reticence to explore the very personal implications of some of the lessons—this is fundamentally a spiritual issue, and all we can say is, God cares about you and will help you live in faith and trust if you ask. No one is too old, too learned, too young, or too inexperienced to grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ. But it won’t happen if you keep that “hall closet” with its skeleton locked and inaccessible to our Lord.
- Maintaining appropriate privacy while welcoming legitimate accountability with the members of your discussion group—this issue comes up when you feel the answer to a particular question is just too private to share. It’s okay to say, “Pass,” and the others will understand; but we also expect you not to avoid this issue in your life and will want to pray for you.



Love Your Group. Listen carefully to each other and welcome contributions to the discussion. Be sensitive to group dynamics by not monopolizing the conversation. Come prepared and share honestly. Open yourself to the ministry and love of your small group members. Pray for one another, and allow the others to know what is concerning you, too. Take this opportunity to deepen your relationships not only with Christ but with each other!



...so that you may know the exact truth. Luke 1:3-4

THE BACKGROUND OF LUKE

Who wrote the gospel?

Luke's name is not found in the gospel, so we must do a little sleuthing to piece together a plausible identity of the author and his audience. Our main sources from the Scripture are Luke 1:1-4, Acts 1:3, Acts 16:10-17 (and other subsequent "we passages" in Acts), and Colossians 4:10-11. From these references we can deduce:

- Luke was not an eyewitness of Jesus' life, death, or resurrection; therefore, he was not an apostle. He was not one of the original twelve disciples.
- Luke was probably not Jewish, according to Colossians 4:10-11, but certainly was a Christian believer.
- Luke was an occasional companion of the apostle Paul, starting with Paul's second missionary journey. Luke likely joined the party in Troas (Acts 16:10-17). We know this because the narrative in Acts shifts to "we did [this]" in Acts 16.
- Luke is identified as "the doctor" (Colossians 4:10-11). There is some demonstration of the author's medical interest in the gospel, but no special medical vocabulary is used. Physicians of the first century would have used the knowledge and methods of Hippocrates (4th century BC). Though organized, Hippocrates' theories were incomplete at a time when medicine was considered an art rather than a science. Nevertheless, there was a body of medical data that was categorized and added to by new observation. [The "scientific method" would come almost 1,000 years later.] Luke knew how to gather evidence.
- Luke's vocabulary is extensive and varied, suggesting a higher education and a certain intelligence.
- Luke researched the life and work of Jesus carefully, by interviewing eyewitnesses. He desired to produce an orderly account of Jesus' ministry and life in the early church. We presume that one of his primary sources was Paul himself. Because of the similarities in their introductions, vocabulary, and style, there is little dispute that the gospel and the Acts of the Apostles were written by the same author. This joint account represents a significant amount of work, as the story's time line spans several decades and encompasses many characters.

Where did the events of Luke's gospel take place?

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Israel, about five miles south of Jerusalem. The geographical range of most gospel activity encompasses Nazareth, Capernaum and Bethsaida on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, and Jerusalem to the south, altogether spanning no more than 80 miles. Travel was primarily on foot and skirted Samaria between the two regions. Matthew and Mark record journeys to Tyre and Sidon on the Lebanese coast and the cities of the Decapolis, another 80 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. But Luke does not mention these excursions, favoring instead to relate encounters with non-Jews within the area we now call the West Bank. Unlike John, who has Jesus going back and forth between Galilee and Jerusalem during his three-year ministry, Luke has Jesus turning his face resolutely toward Jerusalem in 9:51 as the culmination of his ministry approaches.

Just as movie directors make decisions that simplify or streamline a plot so that the main point is not obscured, Luke has arranged the rich and varied information about Jesus' life and ministry into a cohesive whole for our benefit. As the story unfolds, we see that Luke's emphasis is on Jesus and the nature of God's saving work through him. "To you is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!" May you experience his vitality and recognize his mission in your life as you study Luke's account.

