

Commentary on Luke chapter 1 verses 1-38, by Chuck Smith 5.22.22

Pastor John Donovan, cell phone 508-380-0471

Pastor Terry Gerlarneau, cell phone 603-455-4399

Web site todbc.org email us at opendoorbiblechurch@todbc.org

May memory verse Romans 6:14 (NKJV)

¹⁴ For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

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Luke, the author of this third gospel, was called by Paul the apostle "the beloved physician." Luke was a Greek. And he is the only Gentile to have the privilege of placing scripture in that holy canon of scripture, which we recognize as inspired of God. And there are two New Testament books that are ascribed to Luke. Of course, the gospel according to Luke and then the Acts of the apostles, which he begins again addressing himself to Theophilus saying, "The former treatise have I made onto thee, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach" ([Acts 1:1](#)).

There are some who say that the word Theophilus is not actually a person at all, but just the word in Greek, Theophilao is "lover of God". And so that Luke is actually addressing his letter to the lovers of God. However, the people were usually named after hopes or aspirations or whatever of their parents, and there is no real reason to believe that Theophilus was not an actual person. In fact, being addressed as the most excellent Theophilus indicates that he was actually a ruler in the Roman Empire, as that is a title that is given to men who had a ruling position within the Roman Empire.

Luke introduces the gospel to Theophilus in the first four verses of chapter one.

Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in an orderly fashion those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them onto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; It seemed good to me also, having had a complete understanding of all of these things from the very first, to write unto thee an orderly progression, most excellent Theophilus. That you may know the certainty of those things, wherein you have been instructed ([Luk 1:1-4](#)).

So Luke here declares that he has heard the message from those persons who were actually the eyewitnesses to these things. Now Luke, no doubt, interviewed personally Mary, in order that he might get a complete understanding concerning the circumstances that were surrounding the birth of Jesus. Luke, being a doctor, would be interested in various aspects that bordered on the medical profession. And it is obvious that he received the information of chapters one and two directly from Mary. And so

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from his interview with Mary and his questioning of Mary, he got the information for chapters one and two. And the information in these two chapters is not found in detail like this in the other gospels. He had heard Peter and John and those who had been with Jesus, those who were eyewitnesses, he heard their stories, as they told of their relationship with Jesus and of the work and the ministry that Jesus performed. And then he, no doubt, questioned them more thoroughly to get a more complete understanding. And having what he feels to be a complete understanding of the story, he then proceeds to write to this man Theophilus, in order that he might realize the certainty of those things that he had heard.

Now Luke begins then the actual story of the gospel of Jesus by dealing with the birth, first of all, of John the Baptist, who was to be the forerunner of Jesus Christ.

And so there was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth ([Luk 1:5](#)).

So immediately we are introduced to the persons that will be involved in the first part of his narrative here.

Zacharias of the tribe of Levi, making him then one of the priests. He was of the family of Abiram. His wife was also of the tribe of Levi. She was a descendent from the family of Aaron. Now at this particular time in Israel, there were around 20,000 descendants from Levi, male descendants, involved in the priesthood. And in as much as it was, of course, impossible for all 20,000 to serve continually in the temple, each family had their turn to serve, and they served twice during the year for one-week periods. And when it was the turn of your family to serve, they would cast lots to determine what particular aspect of the service you would be engaged in. And maybe once in a lifetime the priest would have his lot to fall upon the offering of the incense before the altar of incense before the Lord. This was usually just a once in a lifetime; one day in your life you get this glorious privilege of going in with the incense before the altar of incense to offer it before the Lord for the people. And so this was surely a significant and a special day for Zacharias, who during the time that he was serving there, the lot fell on him for this particular task.

Now we are told concerning Zacharias and Elisabeth that:

They were both righteous before God, [they] walked in all of the commandments and the ordinances of the Lord blameless ([Luk 1:6](#)).

Two beautiful, righteous people who are quite insignificant as far as the world is concerned. People who loved the Lord, people who walked with the Lord, people you would have never heard about, unless they had been so involved in the story of Jesus Christ. These people, because of their involvement, we are told of them.

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Now we are also told that:

They had no child, because Elisabeth was barren; and they were both now well stricken in years ([Luk 1:7](#)).

That is, the years had taken their toll; they were bent over. They had become feeble. And the idea of well stricken in years is that of feebleness as the result of age.

In that culture it was considered a curse for a woman not to bear a child. And it was legal grounds for divorce. Had Zacharias desired to put away Elisabeth because of her inability to bear children, no one would have questioned him. It would have been accepted by everybody. But, no doubt, there was a tremendous love that they shared together, and they shared this grief and this sorrow together that they were unable to have children.

Now it came to pass, that, while he was fulfilling the priest office before God in the order of his course ([Luk 1:8](#)),

They had the priestly orders, and this was one of the weeks that he had to come in for his particular duty of service.

According as was the custom of the priest office, his lot fell that he might burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord ([Luk 1:9](#)).

And you can imagine the excitement of this old man, probably the only day in his life. And he probably had given up by now ever having the opportunity of burning incense. When the lots were drawn, his was that lot to burn the incense before the Lord that day.

And the whole multitude of people were praying outside at the time of incense ([Luk 1:10](#)).

Now they would go in before the altar of incense, and they would take this little golden bowl that had burning coals that had been taken from the altar where they had offered the sacrifice. The lamb was offered in the morning and in the evening. And they would take the coals from the altar, put it in this little golden bowl, and then they would put the incense on top. And they would go in swinging this little incense burner before the altar incense, and the smoke, the sweet smelling smoke, would ascend up, and it was a beautiful symbolism of how God receives the prayers of His people. Our prayers that we offer to God arise before God as a sweet smelling odor, pleasant, beautiful.

In the book of Revelation, chapter 5, when the lamb takes the scroll out of the right hand of Him who is sitting upon the throne, John said, "And the twenty-four elders came forth with their little golden bowls, full of odors, which are the prayers of the saints, and they offered them before the throne of God" ([Revelation 5:8](#)).

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Now you remember that when God gave to Moses the instructions for building the tabernacle, and all of these furnishings, and the methods of worship were established, the Lord told Moses over, and over, "Now be careful that you make it exactly according to plan." And the reason why he was to make it exactly according to the plan that was given to him was because this whole thing was a model of what is in heaven. If you want to know what the heavenly scene, the throne of God and all looks like, you can study the tabernacle. And it was a model of heavenly things. So, as the priest on earth would take this little golden bowls and fill them with incense and the incense would arise as the prayer, a sweet smelling savor before God, so in heaven. Chapter 5 of Revelation, we see it fulfilled in the heavenly scene, as the twenty-four elders offer their little golden bowls full of odors, which are the prayers of the saints.

So a beautiful symbolism there. And so in offering the incense before the altar of incense, which was in the inner court of the temple, in the holy place, not the holy of holies--only the high priest went in there once a year, but the holy place which was just outside of the holy of holies.

And while he was there, the multitude of people were waiting outside. Because it was then customary when he came out to place the blessing of God upon the people. It was a special occasion, and the people would wait for the priest to come out and give them this blessing.

And there appeared onto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard ([Luk 1:11-13](#));

What prayer? For years he had been praying, "Lord, please give me a son." It really gives to us encouragement for persistence in prayer. He didn't give up. Even though he was now old. Well stricken with years. He was still praying, "Oh, Lord, I'd love to have a son."

thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name, Johanam ([Luk 1:13](#)).

Which means the Lord is gracious. It is shortened to John, but the full name is actually Johanam.

And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many will rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and he shall drink neither wine, nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him [that is the Messiah] in the spirit and in the power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord ([Luk 1:14-17](#)).

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Now the last word of God to man prior to this was in Malachi, the fourth chapter. And the last word of God to man was in [Malachi 4:5](#), "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord: and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse."

That was the last word of God to man in the old covenant period, prior to the angel meeting Zacharias there at the altar of the Lord. And it is interesting though the Lord has been silent for four hundred years, that very promise, which was the last promise of the old testament, is the first word of the Lord in the new testament, which is the fulfillment of that prophesy, which is about to take place, as this child that will be born, will go forth in the spirit and in the power of Elijah.

Now there is a lot of confusion as regards to John the Baptist, and the prophesy of the coming of Elijah. In John's gospel we are told that as John was baptizing at the Jordan River, the Pharisees came out and they demanded of him his authority, and who gave him the authority to do these things. They said, "Are you the Messiah?" He said, "No." They said, "Are you Elijah?" He said, "No." "Then who are you?" He said, "I am just the voice of one crying in the wilderness; prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight His path" ([John 1:20-23](#)).

And yet, here the angel of the Lord tells his father that he will be going forth in the Spirit and in the power of Elijah.

Now the confusion exists in the fact that there were two comings of the Messiah. The first coming that we find recorded here in the gospel. The second coming for which we presently wait. And even as Elijah will appear before Jesus comes again. So John the Baptist came in the Spirit and in the power of Elijah. And if a person is able to accept it, he was the fulfillment of that promise of Elijah coming before the Lord, to cause the hearts of the children to turn to their fathers, and their fathers to their children.

So the confusion lies in the fact that there are two comings of the Messiah, as well as the two comings of Elijah, both of them to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

He shall be great in the sight of the Lord. He was to be as a Nazarene. Not drinking wine or strong drink, but filled with the Holy Spirit, from his mother's womb.

In a little bit we will be studying where Mary, when she received word that she was to be the instrument through which the Messiah was to be born, went to this little village of Juda, the home of Elisabeth, who at that point was six months pregnant. And when Mary walked in and greeted Elisabeth, Elisabeth felt the baby leap in her womb, and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

So at that time, no doubt, John was also filled with the Holy Spirit, a prenatal experience, which is quite interesting indeed. Even from his mother's womb.

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Now though Zacharias had been praying that he might have a son, the prayers had not really been prayers of faith anymore, just of a hardly even a glimmering hope. Because when this angel told him that he was to have a son, he didn't believe it. And he challenged the angel.

Zacharias said onto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife is well stricken in years. And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and I've been sent to speak to thee, and to show thee this glad tidings. And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because you did not believe my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season ([Luk 1:18-20](#)).

It is interesting to me that we so often put such great emphasis upon our faith that God will do a certain thing. As though God is almost impotent apart from man's faith, to operate, or to work. But here with Zacharias, the angel said, "Alright, you want a sign? You're not going to be able to speak until the day the child is born, because you didn't believe."

The things that God is going to perform, whether you believe it or not, God is going to do it. Your unbelief will not stop the work of God. It will not hinder the purposes of God. And so many times they put heavy trips on us. You know, as though God's work is totally responsible upon my hanging in there and believing, and I feel so guilty because maybe I failed God, and thus, people are lost, or whatever, because I failed God. No, God's purposes shall stand, whether I believe it or not. You see, your believing or not believing doesn't really hinder the work of God. He is going to do what He is going to do, in spite of us. And that's sort of comforting, because I'd hate to think that God's work depended on me and my faithfulness.

Now God's work is going to be done. You may lose out on those rewards and blessings that you could have experienced, had you've been faithful. But your unfaithfulness is not going to stop that which God has purposed to do.

And so here is Zacharias, filled with unbelief. "How can I know this? I am old man, my wife is an old woman. What do you mean I am going to have a son?" " I am Gabriel."

The last appearance of Gabriel to our knowledge on the earth was about a little over five hundred years prior to this particular event, when Gabriel appeared to the prophet Daniel and gave to Daniel one of the clearest prophesies concerning the time of the coming of the Messiah. It was Gabriel who said unto Daniel that there are seventy sevens determined upon the nation of Israel, to finish the transgression, to make an end of iniquity. To bring in the everlasting righteousness. To anoint the most holy place. To complete the prophetic picture. And no one understand from the time the commandment goes forth to restore and rebuild Jerusalem, to the coming of the Messiah, the prince, will be seven sevens and sixty-two sevens. The walls should be

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built again in troublous times. And after the sixty-nine sevens will the Messiah be caught off, and receive nothing for Himself, and the people will be dispersed.

And so this amazing prediction of the time of the coming of the Messiah was given by none other than our friend Gabriel. Sort of a timeless fellow, because now it's over five hundred years later, and he shows up on the scene again. Probably looking as young and fresh as ever. Announcing now to Zacharias that his wife Elisabeth was to bear the son, which was to be the forerunner of the Messiah, as he will go forth in the Spirit and in the power of Elijah to fulfill the prophesy of sending the messenger before the face of the Lord.

It would appear that as God has set in order the things of the universe, that He probably placed Gabriel as the overseer in charge of the details of getting His Son into the world. Preparing the people on the earth, preparing Mary, because it was Gabriel who appeared to Mary. Preparing here Zacharias. It would seem that he has a hard time keeping secrets. He appeared five hundred years earlier and spilled the beans to Daniel of a time that the Messiah would be coming. And so here he is again, some five hundred years later. It will be interesting to meet Gabriel, looking young and fresh as ever, as he is one of those special angels that God has committed great responsibilities to. And I for one am quite anxious to meet Gabriel.

Now the people waited for Zacharias, [They were waiting outside for that blessing from the priest.] and they marveled that he tarried so long in the temple. And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and so they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple; for he beckoned unto them, and he remained speechless. And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house ([Luk 1:21-23](#)).

So, because they only served for a week at the time. In just a few days he left there, Jerusalem, and went to Judea, which is nearby Jerusalem, actually.

And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and she hid herself for five months, saying, Thus has the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach from among men ([Luk 1:24-25](#)).

Her inability to bear children caused her to be a reproach. But the Lord, she says, has taken that away.

And in the sixth month [the same fellow] the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee, named Nazareth. To a virgin who was espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary ([Luk 1:26-27](#)).

Three terms we need to deal with: engaged, espoused, and married. A person could become engaged when they were two years old, because for the most part, marriage was by arrangement. So parents would get together, they would be friends. You have a

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pretty little girl, your friends would have a nice little boy, and we're friends with each other, why don't we have your son marry my daughter? And we make the arrangements. And so here these little kids, they are four years old, walking around saying, "Well, we're engaged." Because the arrangements had been made by their parents that they would have each other as husband and wife. They felt that decisions as important as marriage should never be left to the capriciousness of youth. They felt that young people didn't have enough wisdom to choose their mates.

Now as they became older, and usually they were married by the age of fifteen or sixteen years old. And as they became older, one year before they had the marriage ceremony, they entered into a period known as espousal, where they were as though they were married, in that they were committed completely to each other, but there was never a consummation of the marriage during this period of time. However, once they entered into the period of espousal, they were considered married to the extent that if the fellow wanted to break it off, he had to actually get a divorce, even though the marriage at this point had never been consummated.

So Mary and Joseph were in this period of espousal. Where they were totally committed to each other and to the marriage of each other, and yet, the marriage was not to be consummated until the ceremony at a later time.

And so, "To the virgin who was espoused," she was in this period of the one year before the actual consummation of the marriage, "to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary."

And the angel Gabriel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou art highly favored, the Lord is with you: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at what he was saying, and thought in her mind what kind of a greeting is this. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favor with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shall call his name Jehoshua ([Luk 1:28-31](#)).

Which in Greek is Jesus, but in Hebrew Jehoshua, which means, Jehovah is salvation.

Now you remember in Matthew's gospel when Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, and he was really troubled by it, because they were espoused. He thought he might just give her a bill of divorcement, put her away privately, because if he would her expose her publicly she'd be stoned to death. And the angel of the Lord came to Joseph at night and said, "Fear not to take Mary as your wife. That which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit, and thou shalt call His name Jehoshua" ([Matthew 1:20-21](#)). So both Mary and Joseph were instructed by the angel of the Lord in the naming of Jesus. But when he told Joseph, "Call his name Jehoshua," he said, "For He shall save His people from their sins."

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So the name is extremely significant because it expresses the mission of Jesus, and that is bringing God's salvation to men. Jehoshua, the Lord is become our salvation.

Then the angel Gabriel went on to say,

He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of His father David ([Luk 1:32](#)):

And, of course, throughout the Old Testament prophecies, there was that promise that the Messiah would sit upon the throne of David, to order it, and to establish it in righteousness and in judgment, from henceforth, even forever.

And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end ([Luk 1:33](#)).

In the book of Revelation, again, that glorious song that Handel has put to music, "King of Kings and Lord of Lords, forever and ever, hallelujah, hallelujah."

So the angel is telling about the eternal reign of Jesus Christ.

Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? ([Luk 1:34](#))

Now there is a vast difference between the question of Zacharias and the question of Mary. Zacharias was questioning the word of the Lord. Mary was only asking information on the procedures. "How is this to be, seeing I know not a man?" Hers was not the question of doubt. Hers was only an inquiring question as to the manner by which it should be fulfilled. She believed. And that is pointed out a little later as Elisabeth said, "Blessed art thou who hast believed the words that the Lord spoke to thee."

She believed the word that the Lord spoke to her. However, she didn't know by what process it was to be fulfilled, and that really was her question. "How is this going to be, seeing I am a virgin, I know not a man?"

And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy one which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is the sixth month of her pregnancy, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her ([Luk 1:35-38](#)).

Now remember it is possible that at this point she was only about sixteen years old. And yet, there is such a depth of character that is demonstrated in her. And it begins right here as when the angel tells her all of these remarkable, unusual things that are bound

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to create problems, as they did with Joseph her espoused husband, she said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word." With other words, she submitted herself to the purpose of God. "Here I am, let the Lord do as He pleases in my life." That kind of commitment. And I am just intrigued. And Mary is another one that I want to meet. What an unusually remarkable person. Surely the most blessed of any woman who has ever lived.

Now culturally it was the dream, the hope, the desire of every Jewish girl to be the instrument through which God would send the Messiah into the world. And thus, many young Jewish girls, when they had a boy born to them, would call his name Joshua. Hoping that maybe God would use that child to be the instrument of His salvation. And that was a reason, one of the reasons why being barren was considered such a curse. You have no opportunity to be the mother of the Messiah if you are barren. And that was the hope of every young Jewish girl to be the instrument that God would use, the dream, the hope. And with Elisabeth being barren, she had lost that hope. And, of course, everyone who was barren, they would lose the hope. "Oh, I can't be the instrument." And that was a very disappointing thing to them, to feel, "I can't be the instrument that God uses to accomplish His purpose."

But such was the hope of every young girl in Israel. And the fulfillment of that hope came to one, a young girl from Nazareth. A beautiful young girl in character and spirit named Mary.

Chuck Swindoll's overview of Luke

Who wrote the book? While Luke's name never appears in this gospel, ancient Christian tradition unanimously ascribes the book to him. One ancient prologue written to introduce the gospel describes Luke as a Syrian from Antioch. With this piece of information, we can deduce that Luke was probably not Jewish. Paul also listed him with other Gentiles in his greetings to the Colossians (4:14). The ancient prologue goes on to state that Luke eventually settled in the Greek city of Thebes, where he died at age 84.

Luke's own introduction to his gospel indicates that Luke composed the letter with the purpose of providing a careful rendering of the events of Christ's life in chronological order. As a physician, Luke would have been trained as a careful observer, a quality that would have been invaluable in this project. The result was the first part of a two-volume work written to Theophilus. We know the subsequent volume as Acts.

Where are we? Much of the dating of the book of Luke depends on the dating of Acts. Luke's second volume cuts off with Paul imprisoned in Rome, before Paul's death (AD 68) and even before the persecution of Christians broke out under Nero (AD 64). It stands to reason that the book of Luke was completed before Acts. But when?

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[Acts 21:17](#) says that Luke accompanied Paul on the apostle's final visit to Jerusalem, a visit that occurred in AD 57–58. Eventually, the Jews had Paul arrested in the temple, a two-year ordeal which ended with Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea. Luke likely used this time apart from Paul to begin gathering information for writing the gospel from primary sources—those people who had witnessed the ministry, death, and resurrection appearances of Jesus. If Luke took to writing his gospel soon after the information was gathered, then it would have been completed around AD 60, after Paul had been transferred to a Roman prison.

Why is Luke so important? Luke's interest in people is undeniable. Much of the material unique to Luke's gospel involves Jesus's interactions with individuals, many of them on the fringes of "acceptable" society—sinners, women, and children among them. Like Matthew and Mark, Luke recorded the incident of a woman coming to pour perfume on Jesus's feet. But Luke was the only gospel writer to point out the fact known to all present that she was an immoral woman ([Luke 7:37](#)). In a similar way, we find in Luke alone the conversation between the robbers crucified alongside Jesus, one of them defending Jesus and receiving the promise of paradise. Luke's portrayal of Jesus reveals in our Lord a man come to minister and show compassion to all people, no matter their station in life.

What's the big idea? Just as Matthew portrays Jesus as the King, and as Mark reveals Him as the Servant, so Luke offers a unique perspective of Jesus as the Son of Man. This phrase, "Son of Man," was Jesus's favorite way to refer to Himself.

Most famous among the people unique to Luke's gospel is the tax collector Zaccheus, a short man who had to climb a tree to see over the crowds as Jesus approached his town. Jesus ended up sharing a meal with Zaccheus at his house, much to the chagrin of the local religious leaders. When Zaccheus expressed his regret over his former way of life and vowed to make restitution, Jesus responded with what became the theme of Luke's gospel: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" ([Luke 19:10](#)). Luke portrayed Jesus as God's ideal Man, who offers salvation to all humanity—Jew and Gentile alike.

How do I apply this? The richness of Luke's portrayal of Jesus has profound implications for our relationship with God today. Jesus walks through Luke's gospel illustrating His deep and abiding care for people, regardless of what they have done or their status in society.

Do you believe that God loves you no matter what you've done? The fact that the eternal Son of God condescended to lower Himself, take on human flesh, make Himself subject to human limitations, and seek out His people in bodily form shows us clearly how much God cares for us and, in turn, how we are to care for others.