

Mercy Fulfilled in the Gospel of Luke

By Tami Jelinek

The gospel of Luke opens with a clear statement of the author's intent: "to set down an orderly account of the events that *have been fulfilled* among us" (1:1-3). Zachariah then prophesies the fulfillment of Israel's every hope in the person and work of Jesus Christ (1:68-79). The gospel closes with the accounting of several conversations between the risen Lord Jesus and His disciples, just prior to His ascension, in which He reminds them of everything He had told them, and "beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounds to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (24:27). Luke's gospel is the story of the "mighty Savior" through whom "God has looked favorably on His people" (cf. 1:68,69), who came to "perform the mercy promised to Israel's fathers" (1:72), to give "knowledge of salvation to His people by the forgiveness of their sins" (1:77), and to bring "light to the Gentiles and glory to Israel" (2:32). It is the story of the One who came proclaiming *Himself* as the fulfillment of "the good news of the kingdom of God" (4:43): "His mercy is for those who fear Him, from generation to generation" (1:50).

From the beginning of Luke's gospel, mercy is equated with salvation (1:77-78), and both are proclaimed to be the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and specifically God's covenant made with Abraham (1:73). According to the prophets Israel's Savior would be none other than God (cf. Isaiah 43:3; 45:21; Hosea 13:4), and Mary's song confirms this: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior"

(1:46-47). Mary's song continues to associate God's salvation with His mercy and the remembrance of His covenant: "He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever" (1:54-55). Although Luke's audience was predominantly made up of Gentile Christians, he deemed it important to assure his readership that the gospel they had been taught was indeed the truth (1:4); and we see Luke offering that assurance by appealing to Old Testament prophecies, made to Israel, that had been fulfilled "among them" in Jesus Christ. "Luke shows how God first fulfilled his promises to Israel, and only then extended these blessings to Gentiles. God had shown himself faithful to the Jews, therefore, the Word that reached the Gentiles was also trustworthy...The saving of Israel was necessary for the security of Gentile faith." ¹

R. Alan Culpepper confirms the prominence of this theme of fulfillment in Luke, and its relationship to Israel's expectations of redemption through her Messiah: "The reference to the things that have been 'fulfilled among us' looks back on God's redemptive acts in the history of Israel. In a word, Luke acknowledges that the story of Jesus is also the story of the fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes, the climactic episode in a sequence of events that stretches back through the promises of the prophets. Repeatedly Luke will emphasize the pattern of the fulfillment of Scripture in the events of the gospel (cf. Luke 1:20; 4:21; 9:31; 24:44)." ²

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke (Sacra Pagina Series)*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 4,10.

² R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible: Luke - John (Volume 9)* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 41.

Luke records two instances in Jesus' early ministry that serve as especially poignant examples of His claims to be Israel's God and Savior—the fulfillment of God's promised mercy to His people. The first is in chapter 4, when He stands in the synagogue of His hometown of Nazareth and reads from Isaiah 61. It is notable that He intentionally locates “the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.’” And after He has finished reading, He sits back down and says, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4:17-21). Isaiah 61 is a prophecy of God's “favor” to Israel, when He would comfort her and clothe her with garments of salvation, righteousness and praise. In other words, when He would forgive her sins. The second instance is in chapter 7. John, who is in prison about to be beheaded (Matthew helps us out here, cf. Matthew 11:2-3), sends his disciples to Jesus to ask Him, “Are you the One who is to come, or should we look for another?” Maybe he doubted, maybe he needed comfort because of what he was suffering, or some extra reassurance-- we are not told why he needed to ask what he presumably already knew. It is probably no coincidence though that Jesus' answer is in keeping with Luke's stated purpose at the beginning of his gospel, which is to give his readers *assurance* by appealing to the authority of the Old Testament prophets. Instead of answering their question directly, Jesus says “go tell John what you have seen and heard,” and He lists the various signs He has performed, using the language of Isaiah (cf. Isaiah 35:4-6)—a book with which John, “the voice crying in the wilderness” (3:4; cf. Isaiah 40:3), was certainly very familiar.

John got the message to be sure. Jesus was saying loud and clear: “Yes, I am the One. Behold your God” (cf. 7:18-22).

In fulfillment of the Scriptures, Jesus came to “seek and save the lost” (19:10). Culpepper notes that Luke is the only synoptic gospel to call Jesus “Savior,” and suggests that Luke’s “most dramatic insight is his perception that Jesus announced salvation for all people alike.”³ As we have already observed, Jesus came to fulfill the promises made to Abraham’s descendants. But John the Baptist warns these physical descendants of Abraham to “bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (3:8). Jesus continues this warning to those who believe themselves to be the rightful heirs of His kingdom: “There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last” (13:28-30). Paul confirms that only those who have faith in Christ are the true children of Abraham (cf. Galatians 3:7). And Jesus repeats the phrase, “your faith has saved you” four times in Luke’s gospel (cf. 7:50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42). With the healing of the centurion’s servant, a Gentile, and proclaiming that He had not found such faith even in Israel, Jesus is making it known that He is coming not only to bring salvation to Israel but to the Gentiles as well (7:1-10). During Jesus’ clash with the Jews in Nazareth recorded in chapter 4, after stating, “no prophet is

³ Culpepper, 21.

accepted in his own country,” He recalls to them that during the time of Elijah God chose to feed a Gentile widow while many widows in Israel went hungry; and that during the time of Elisha God chose to cleanse a Syrian leper, but not the lepers in Israel (4:24-27). By telling these stories, Jesus is confirming that the promise made to Abraham included mercy for the Gentiles (cf. Romans 15:8-16), and foreshadowing the fulfillment of Simeon’s prophecy that as a “light to the Gentiles,” He would also bring “the rising and falling of many in Israel” (2:32).

Throughout the gospel we hear the members of the ruling class of Israel, the Pharisees, complaining that Jesus eats and drinks with sinners (5:30; 15:1-2). These keepers of the law, who view themselves as righteous and look down upon others (18:9), are incensed that Jesus doesn’t “fast and pray” (5:33), “works” on the Sabbath and even *heals* on the Sabbath (6:1; 6:6), and doesn’t “wash before dinner” (11:37). They looked for righteousness in the law and sought to justify themselves through the law (10:29), and “loved the seat of honor in the synagogues” (11:43); but Jesus calls them hypocrites (12:1) and even charges them with complicity in the murder of the prophets (11:44-50).

The primary theological emphasis of Luke’s gospel is stated at both the beginning and the end of his narrative: that through Christ, God is granting salvation⁴ to His people by

⁴ Some, such as Joel B. Green, have suggested that Luke is portraying “God’s mighty acts of salvation as socio-political reversal” (1:51), and that references to “salvation from enemies” (1:71) and “redemption of Israel” point to “the cessation of foreign occupancy and subjection.” While I agree with the eschatological context of Israel’s salvation, I do not agree that it is a political salvation. Christ’s kingdom was to come “without observation” (17:20), and is “not of this world” (John 18:36). Green’s assertion that it will only be realized when God “brings an end to political dominance and political oppression” is paramount to saying that the eschatological expectations of Jesus and the apostles were unrealized, which would discredit their entire message, not to mention the authority of the Old Testament prophecies on which those eschatological expectations were based: Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 59.

the forgiveness of their sins (cf. 1:77; 24:47) in fulfillment of all the prophets had spoken (cf. 1:70; 18:31; 24:25,27,44). This is the promised mercy that Christ came to “perform” (1:72). It is given freely to the repentant but withheld from the self-righteous. This contrast is profoundly illustrated by the parable Jesus told about the two men who went to the temple to pray. One, a Pharisee, standing by himself (cf. Isaiah 65:5) came boasting of his self-righteousness; while the other, a tax-collector, standing “far off” cried out to God, “Be merciful to me, a sinner!” Jesus concluded, “I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted” (18:10-14).

Luke is a master storyteller, as seen through not only his artful narration of the parables of Jesus, but also through their placement in order and in relation to one another within the larger story. Many of these parables occur within the “travel narrative” that extends from chapters 9 to 19. Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem serves as both a spatial and thematic context for Luke’s message. “In spatial terms, therefore, Jerusalem is the *center* of Luke’s narrative [of Luke-Acts]⁵...the city and its temple (which Luke treats as virtually identical) were of obvious historical importance both for Judaism and the nascent Christian movement. But more than historical reflection is involved. For Luke, the city and Temple stand as symbols of the people of Israel. The death of Jesus and the beginning of the church in Jerusalem provide the paradigmatic expression of the Jewish people’s acceptance or rejection of God’s visitation. Jerusalem, in short, is the place of pivot in Luke’s story of the Prophet and the people,”⁶ and the place all that was written of

⁵ A case can be made for reading Luke and Acts as one continuous narrative.

⁶ Johnson, 15.

Him would be fulfilled (18:31; 22:37) and where “all flesh would see the salvation of God” (3:6).

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