

DIVINE TRUTH  
NOTES FROM THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

**1. WEEK DIVINE CERTAINTY**

**2.**

First a wish for a happier and healthier new year for all of you. And I want to add to that wish a hope that what Luke tells us in his Gospel will contribute to making the year a spiritually happier and healthier one for you, as it has done for me during these uncertain times. There can be no doubt the pandemic has changed the way we see our world. Even the way we gather here tonight gives evidence of that. And no one seems to be giving us truthful answers about how it will affect us all in the short-term, never mind the medium- and long-term. Not knowing how our personal lives will be affected by local, national and international developments leads to confusion and, for me, has made the world a much more scary place. But Luke offers us the antidote to the confusion and even fear that this uncertainty brings. Luke offers us the certainty of divine truth.

He tells us things that will help us appreciate that what we hold on to is the only way of life that makes sense, because its divine design means it is certain, unchanging and it will extend into eternity. It's faith in that truthful fact that can help us to overcome uncertainty and fear about the circumstances that confront us and seem, at times, to be overwhelming. And Luke gives us a secure basis for a faith that can grow even in such times.

**SLIDE 3**

This has been a personal journey for me and I'm ashamed to admit that for years I thought of Matthew, Mark and Luke in terms of the verse in the hymn

Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear  
Things he would tell me if he were here  
Scenes by the wayside, tales of the sea  
Stories of Jesus tell them to me.

And if you'd been in Sunday School during childhood and heard those stories in various settings for decades, you feel you already know the story of Jesus' life on earth and his death and resurrection. There is no doubt that is essential knowledge- for someone described Jesus as the picture of God in character, word and deed. We need to see that picture – we cannot be Christians without this information about Jesus. Yet often we do not have the opportunity, the occasion or the time to investigate the Gospels in more detail to ask especially what this information is actually teaching us about the certainty of our faith. We tend to think of that as 'theology' – the 'meat' of Christianity which is found in the letters of Paul, Peter, James and Hebrews and the others. But taking a look at Luke from this perspective has been an eye-opener for me. There is more to the Gospels than just 'stories of Jesus'. There are deeper truths to be found there which affect how we live our lives.

So I started my study by putting myself in the position of a non-Christian and asked – How can I be absolutely sure of what I am told – especially given that nothing in this world gives me confidence that I am being told the truth about anything that is going on in it? Can I really be confident, can I really be certain that Luke is telling me the truth about the topics in these talks? What would help to convince me that studying what he wrote was a worthwhile exercise?

**SLIDE 4**

Well, to begin with I found that Luke's Gospel is the longest book in the NT (New Testament) - 1151 verses and he wrote a sequel to it – the Book of Acts. Together they make up 27.1% of

the NT, more than any other author. Acts is the only record we have of the progress Christianity made in the aftermath of the resurrection. And, if this is the case, then we first need to be sure that Luke has got his information right about the things that he says are believed to “have been fulfilled among us” -otherwise everything the church stands for is on shaky ground. Luke must have been convinced of the reality and the truth of his information, for he asserts it is “surely” believed among us in the very first verse. His own conviction led him to spend much time and effort into writing an orderly account, especially for what would have been a very small, persecuted and despised audience in his day. Since he wasn’t intending to write for the sake of money or the fame of being a best-selling author, he must have recognised that what he was recording was a significant turning point in the way the world worked. The irony is that Luke has been a best-selling author for the last 2000 years since the Bible is still one of the most famous and best-selling books in the world.

Given the materialistic ethos of our day a cynic would ask – If it wasn’t for money or fame, why did he bother to go to so much trouble to write for people, a majority of whom would be illiterate anyway? Luke answers this question in the first four verses of the Gospel which is one long sentence. In short, Luke wanted to give Christians of his day regardless of literacy levels, race, gender, social status or any other human distinction - assurance of something they could hold on to, in order to be able to persevere in their faith, in spite of their individual and collective circumstances. This is something which we still need in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When we look at how he went about this, there is further convincing evidence that he knew what had happened was going to be relevant for a long time to come.

The first four verses contain some words not found elsewhere in the NT. Someone has worked out that there are at least 700 Greek words only used by Luke and this shows that Luke was choosing his words very carefully to convey the importance and significance of what he was writing about. This Gospel was not just a simple description of scenes by the wayside and tales by the sea – it was a serious work that was intended to change the religious worldview of not only his contemporary audience, but all who came into contact with his writing since. So, he had to be careful about what he said and how he said it especially as it is believed that Mark’s gospel was already in circulation. David introduced you to it and scholars believe that Mark’s Gospel was one of Luke’s sources for account.

Scholarly consensus also agrees Luke was a companion of Paul on his missionary journeys. He would have had opportunity to speak to the disciples that Paul met with at different times. He may have spoken perhaps to Jesus’ mother Mary, others who had travelled with or met Jesus, as well as those who had come to faith and experienced the transforming power of salvation. Thus, he both heard the Gospel preached and taught and witnessed for himself the results of what he records in Jewish, Greek and Roman settings – both positive and negative.

If Luke was telling made-up stories about Jesus then Mark, Matthew and John were as well. If that is the case, then everything else that Luke tells us about the founder of our Christian faith and how his ministry led to the growth and development of the church in Acts and other NT books is meaningless. Luke’s account was made public within the experience and/or living memory of his audience. As one scholar put it – his ability to be careless with the facts is limited. This in itself, is evidence that what was recorded was accepted as factual even though it was opposed and persecuted. Had it not been accepted as truth then it is doubtful the Christian church would have survived for around two millennia. In spite of all the threats to its existence from its earliest days, Christianity is still a major world religion. The persecuted church today stands as a symbol to its potency for no one needs to so savagely attack something believed to be

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a baseless or a harmless spiritual movement. No one is prepared to die for their faith if it does not have a true reality. Luke writes an account that he was certain was about to become a world-changing epoch in human history that people would even be willing to die for.

Further evidence of the truth of what Luke writes comes in verse 3 where Luke tells us how he went about his self-appointed task. Luke did not write from hearsay or what was already available. He tells us that he has personally and “carefully investigated everything from the very first” - in other words in “close detail” from the origin of what he records. He wanted to fully assure himself of the accuracy and reliability of his both his oral and written sources. When he says from the very first, we tend to think of the births of John and Jesus recorded in his first two chapters. He must have had a very reliable source of this information because much of what we sing and celebrate at Christmas comes from the Gospel of Luke. Mark and John do not include any details and Matthew gives minimum information. We also tend to think that because Luke’s Gospel begins with the details of the births of Jesus and John the Baptist that is what he meant by the ‘very first’. But Luke goes much further back as these two chapters will show.

While Christianity began with the births of John and Jesus, this is not the beginning of a new story, it is a continuation of an old one. Luke speaks of the things fulfilled among us. What was believed was that Jesus was the fulfilment of a divine plan that unfolded in the OT era. In the first two chapters alone, there are quotations, allusions to and echoes of texts in 18 OT books. Luke’s investigation was not just careful – it was thorough.

- *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel, Micah and Malachi.*

If Luke was a Gentile, to have this knowledge and understanding of the Jewish Scriptures provides further evidence for the truth what he writes. This is a testimony to just how much he had immersed himself in this new faith. Luke was not an outsider – a secular historian - looking in at the history of the emergence of a contemporary religious movement. Luke not only was on the inside: he was on the inside as a man who had become convinced of the truth of the events he was recording, to such an extent that he was compelled – we would say by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – to spend time and effort making as full an account as he possibly could to bolster the beliefs of his audience. As St Augustine said what was “concealed” in the Old Testament was revealed in the New Testament. Luke was revealing it and at the same time was asserting that what was ‘concealed’ was being fulfilled in the lifetime of New Testament believers. He was a writer who had taken every precaution to ensure that what he wrote was a truthful and dependable account because it was based, not on human memory or interpretations, but on the most solid of foundations – the enduring truth of Old Testament Scripture itself. OT citations and echoes permeate the whole Gospel. The beginning for Luke was God’s ancient promises being fulfilled in the appearance of Jesus, His Messiah, on the earth – God incarnate in human form. And Luke wanted to broadcast that conviction by producing a Gospel that would give the Christians of his day – and today’s believers - the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about their faith.

Given evidence of why and how Luke came to write his Gospel, it can be seen that what he produced was intended to do more than simply record a description of a sequence of events. Luke’s carefully chosen words not used by anyone else in the NT, carry the weight of authoritative teaching. He intends that lessons are to be learned from the information he provides. He aimed to inform his readership of what he regarded as the most significant aspects of his subject. Although it is recognized that he had to be selective, he not only provided them with more information than they had previously had, but also provided a greater variety of

material. Another word in verse 4 relating to what Theophilus has been “taught” backs this up because it highlights that what Luke is writing is meant to affirm and confirm the teaching that Theophilus has already received. This further instruction is intended to assure Theophilus and those who also would read his work, that his account God’s intervention in history in sending his Son to be the Saviour of the world had significant implications for their lifestyles, attitudes, hopes and fears. Whatever the individual circumstances, Luke was not intending to leave Christians without some comprehensive ‘instruction’ on their doctrinal basis or the practical aspects of their lives as a result of it.

And that brings us back to where we started. What is in your mind if you have ever asked the question – Are you certain? When that question is asked it means you want to be absolutely sure that you have been given the facts about whatever matter is being discussed. Luke might have anticipated this question from Theophilus and readers like us. We have seen Luke’s efforts to write a comprehensive, accurate and reliable account for the building up of the faith of his audience. In NT times people who embarked on a Christian path needed to, according to the NIV, “know the certainty of the things you have been taught” which according to ‘The Message’ translation means - to know it “beyond a shadow of a doubt.” Today when Christians are being persecuted and Christianity itself is being increasingly maligned and marginalised in our so-called ‘woke’ society, we also need the encouragement and confidence that Luke offers. As mentioned, he tells us that he has personally and “carefully investigated everything from the very first” and he ends his long sentence with the phrase – words of certainty. Because of the way this is translated into English the significance of the word for ‘certainty’ is lost. In Greek sentences a word placed at the very beginning or end of a sentence is emphatic – in other words – take special notice of it! That Luke makes the word ‘certainty’ the very last word in a long sentence - means that he is emphatically telling us that all the words in his Gospel are words that can be relied upon to give us the only sure source of truth we will find in this world.

### SLIDE 10

In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, like Theophilus and those 1<sup>st</sup> century believers, we Christians still need to be reminded and assured that what we have is truth – divine truth – on our side. Today because we know much more than Luke’s audience about Christianity, we take it for granted that Luke has told us the truth because his task was commissioned by God and written under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit. If we believe that - and hold on to that fact- then we can be certain that what Luke teaches us about our faith will keep us spiritually firm and secure. That is because our faith is built on the rock of God’s word that Jesus said will still stand despite all the storms that batter it. And that is the first example of the certainty of divine truth that we can take into this new year with us.

## WEEK 2: DIVINE PROMISE

David I’m starting with you this week to remind you of the words that came at the end of a sermon you preached on 5<sup>th</sup> June 2011 – yes, nearly 11 years ago. I remember the words because the very first bible study I did was based on what you said. ‘Friends, you must believe in the God of the Bible’. Those words came back to me when I started studying what Luke says about the God of the Bible. From what he wrote, it becomes clear that this is an exhortation Luke wanted to impress upon Theophilus and all believers since.

Many books have been written on that topic but Luke gives two fundamental principles for Theophilus and us to learn about God. The first principle is that God keeps his promises. The

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second principle gives the reason why – an all powerful, all knowing and ever-present God intervened in human history to usher in the decisive stage of his planned salvation.

That God's promises were central to the whole Gospel is highlighted in the first three chapters. The rest of the Gospel then reflects how those promises are being worked out through the initial ministry of John the Baptist, but primarily in the ministry of Jesus. The first three chapters focus on God's activity and draw attention to the fact that what happens is related to promises made centuries before these events. But, knowing that human history had reached the most opportune moment and that people were in place to progress his plan and purpose, God took the decision to once more intervene in world history. He did so to inaugurate a new movement in which all the promises he had made to his people in the past would be fulfilled in and through the birth of the promised Messiah. Divine truth lies in the fact that these promises were fulfilled.

What is so remarkable is that there had been an interval of 400 years of prophetic silence, yet Mary, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna all recalled what God said in their Scriptures of his intentions for the world. Naturally, they could only relate this to their own nation at this time. But Luke shows, they were, in the words of a more modern song – standing on the promises of God. In the Magnificat – Mary's Song, the Benedictus – the song and prophecy of Zechariah and the Nunc dimittis – Simeon's words and prophecy, Anna's pronouncement and even in Elizabeth's condition, there is a note of joy and rejoicing that God has chosen them to witness the arrival of new chapter in his dealings with humanity.

Mary calls God her Saviour in the sense of OT deliverance. The angel calls Jesus this in chapter 2. Other references to God as Saviour appear in Psalm 25:5, Isaiah 12:2 and Micah 7:7 and the title denotes the task of the Messiah. OT believers envisaged that the task of the Messiah would be to establish a new form of government under God. In Mary's song this would include God's reversal of the injustice and inequality in society by paying attention to the humble who depend on him and who acknowledge their need of that which only he can provide. These are major themes that will appear time and time again during the ministry of Jesus in Luke's Gospel.

In the Benedictus, Zechariah, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, recalls the covenantal promises given to Abraham and David. Abraham's seed, the ones whose faith brings reconciliation with God, is being gathered together into the kingdom which Jesus will inaugurate. The promise of an immortal descendant of David ruling that kingdom will become a reality. Zechariah prophesies that His own son, in the words of Isaiah, quoted by Luke in chapter 3, will prepare the way for the 'horn of salvation' which God has provided in sending his Son to earth.

The Nunc dimittis – Simeon's words – testify to a personal promise that he would not die until he had seen God's salvation. Luke does not tell us how long ago God had made this promise to him. However, Simeon, in seeing that promise fulfilled was also able by the power of the Spirit to recall another promise about the Messiah being a light to the Gentiles prophesied in Isaiah 42:6-7

*Isaiah 42:6-7 (NIV) I ...will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles .....*

Although Simeon connected his words to the glory of Israel, his words pointed to the future. Jesus' ministry was to the Jews but Luke's inclusion of his contact with Gentiles previews his wider mission. The healing of the Gerasene demonic led to Jesus' instruction to go and witness to this to his own people – and in this sense made him the first 'witness' to the Gentiles. Add to

that the healing of the Samaritan leper and the healing of the centurion's servant and we have the first glimpses of the fulfilment of Simeon's words. But more ominously Simeon was also able to predict the hostility that the Gospel shows the Messiah would face and would lead to his crucifixion.

For Anna, meeting the infant Jesus was a signal to rejoice that the redemption of Jerusalem was at hand. Bearing in mind that Jerusalem was not just the city but was the collective term for the whole nation in Jewish thought, Anna previewed the impact Jesus' arrival would have for the Jewish people.

Elizabeth is a special case. There are many incidents in the OT when God answers prayer in desperate circumstances. We cannot imagine the stigma attached to the childlessness of a saintly, priestly couple in that society. To all intents and purposes this would be seen as a curse or the suspicion of the committal of a great sin. Yet, Isaiah 58:9 shows that it was an accepted tenet of Jewish faith that God would answer prayer.

*Isaiah 58:9 (NIV) Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.*

Gabriel told Zechariah that God had heard his prayer and then announced that Elizabeth, would conceive and bear a son. Zechariah was struck dumb because of his temporary lapse of belief in God's word. His condition lasted until he obeyed God in naming his son John in contravention to family and social custom. Elizabeth's reaction to her pregnancy was the opposite. She immediately gives praise and glory to God who took away her disgrace and in doing so fulfilled the prophecy in Malachi 3:1 of the messenger God would send to prepare the way before the Messiah. This is what Zechariah was able to confirm when he spoke about John in Luke 1:76

*Malachi 3:1(NIV) I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.*

*Luke 1:76 (NIV) And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,*

In these references to ancient promises and parallels to OT thought - and events connected to God's word and action in human affairs, Luke has set the scene for how Jesus will progress all that is envisaged by these OT saints.

That people believed God was once again active on behalf of his chosen people comes from the testimony of people who heard Jesus' words and witnessed his deeds. Glory and praise were given to God. People recognised the wisdom of God in Jesus' speaking with authority. People are amazed and in awe, and praised God when Jesus heals the sick, casts out demons and raises the widow of Nain's son from the dead (5:26; 17:18; 19:37). Just from these examples, it can be seen that Luke does not stint on his view of the sovereign supremacy and powerful pre-eminence of God. You can see why he can broadcast his writing with certainty because he himself is certain about this truth about God. Although he did not explicitly refer to God's promises, in a very real way, he was showing that his messianic, salvific promises were being enacted by Jesus in the presence of that generation of people.

God keeps his promises is a fundamental, principal truth for Luke. For him, God's word is his bond backed by the words of Isaiah 46:10. God will never say something and not do it. The whole of the Gospel can be said to be an account of how God has fulfilled the promises he made

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concerning salvation. He also promised he would do so through a Messiah. Herbert Lockyer wrote a compendium commenting on over 300 messianic prophecies fulfilled by Jesus according to what God had promised. Luke acknowledges this when he records twice in chapter 24 that Jesus taught his disciples that all Moses, the Psalms and prophets had said about him had been fulfilled in his earthly career. And that takes us to the second principle.

The second principle is that God's almighty, all-knowing power has willed, planned, purposed and orchestrated everything mentioned in this Gospel. That was something Luke had to establish in order that believers in his time and since would have the confidence in the promises inherent in Jesus' ministry. Tonight, I have only time to speak of one way Luke portrays the reason why we can depend on God keeping his promises. That is through the names of God found in the Gospel.

After chapter 2 God appears to disappear from view apart from Jesus' baptism and transfiguration, but that perspective is deceptive. I found 69 references to the names and titles of God scattered throughout the 24 chapters. The frequency of the two terms "God" and "Lord" indicate their importance and significance. Luke informs his readers that a divine, supreme, sovereign Being governs the world and is intimately concerned with His human creation. "God" refers to His Person – the Name. A name is the most fundamental possession of any person or anything. A name is necessary for identification in order for appropriate interaction and/or communication to take place. By revealing His personal name to Moses, God had provided the means by which such interaction/communication can take place. In Jesus' ministry this becomes active, as the Fatherhood of God starts to define the relationship with new generations of believers.

The title Lord is inextricably connected to the Name of God. It denotes that interaction and communication will be undertaken by God on His terms and according to His will and purposed methods. This, in itself, is a testimony asserting that no one can challenge what God decides, ordains or commands because He has the right and authority to determine what happens in His world. Jesus himself calls God the 'Lord of the harvest,' 'Lord of heaven and earth' and the "Lord your God". The 'harvest' represents the mission field and refers to the people who will by faith accept and trust in the Messiah. The promise of redemption for humanity appears in this image for disciples are still working in the mission fields to bring in that harvest. The Lord of heaven and earth denotes that all in the universe is subject to whatever God decrees. Implicit in that image is the promise of the new heaven and earth for the people of God. The Lord your God applies to both followers of Jesus and those who reject him. Implicit here is the promise of both salvation and judgement, for the destiny of both groups and will depend on responses to Jesus.

Attach to these names and titles descriptions like Most High and Mighty one and it is not difficult to see how Luke portrays the power and authority of God. These designations denote a loftiness over and above all other existing entities either of the pagan pantheons or human rulers. Mighty One is self-explanatory in that it attributes unrivalled power to God and in the OT often pointed to the Warrior God who fought on the side of his people. By the inclusion of all these names and titles, Luke emphasises that God can accomplish whatever He has ordained and no one and nothing in the universe has the power to withstand Him or stop Him achieving His goals.

God not only fulfilled promises made in the past, he clarified how they would come to their true form in dawning of the messianic age. Luke was given the sense of a turning point in history and

he records what has become known as ‘salvation-history’. His account relates the most important stage in that plan of God and everything that happens in the Gospel reflects what God has planned and purposed to achieve the salvation of the world through his Messiah. And in that plan old promises emerged in their final earthly form.

The promised Davidic eternal kingdom was inaugurated by Jesus’ God-appointed mission. It formed not as the physical kingdom expected by the Jews but as a spiritual kingdom comprising of those who accepted Jesus’ salvific work and committed themselves to being ruled by the word and will of God. Jesus is the agent by whom God has chosen to gather together a redeemed people who will be with him for all eternity. This is a big theme in the Gospel and I will come back to it in a couple of week’s time.

Of more immediate and practical importance is a promise made by Jesus about what God would do for the new generations of believers. Joel had predicted in the last days God’s Spirit would be poured out. John predicted the Coming One would bring the Holy Spirit and fire. In chapter 11:13 Jesus said that good gift that the Father would give to those who asked was the Holy Spirit. But it would not be until after Pentecost that this would be the permanent gift to all believers who responded positively to the apostolic preaching and teaching and committed their lives to the pattern of God’s word and will.

What had been intermittently bestowed on God’s people in the OT for specific periods and purposes would become the prominent feature of the messianic age. The Spirit was bestowed on John in the womb. Jesus was conceived by the Spirit, was commissioned by the Spirit at his baptism and the Spirit was upon him when he announced his salvific task to the people of Nazareth. He rejoiced in the Spirit when the 72 disciples returned from a successful mission. And there can be no doubt that God’s power was mediated to Jesus throughout his ministry by the presence of the Holy Spirit. His last words to his disciples in chapter 24 included the instruction to stay in Jerusalem until the gift of the Spirit would come – a gift of the divine presence and enabling power that would come to all believers to be what God wanted them to be and to do what he wanted them to do.

And the Spirit is the enduring key to God’s presence. Today we follow in the footsteps of the first disciples who accepted Jesus as being sent from God. It is the Holy Spirit who gives believers the certainty that God is their heavenly Father. Jesus assured his disciples that they had no need to worry because God cared much more for them than the birds of the air or the grass of the field – and if he provided for them, how much more would he provide what was needed for his people. God’s intimate knowledge of them meant he was aware of their every need and that he would keep his promise to supply that need. That promise was to those who faced the same responses and dangers as Christians do today - rejection, trials and persecution. God’s knowledge of the situation would give disciples, past and present, the power to withstand what the world would do to them and even the very words to say, if and when they would have to face their mockers and accusers, including rulers and governors who could put them to death. The Spirit that was inextricably linked to Jesus is the same Spirit that links Jesus’ followers to God for as long as this world lasts. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit that convinces us of the truth of all that Luke says of the God of the Bible.

What Luke records leaves us in no doubt that God keeps his promises. They are promises that are still being kept today because of what God did in the past and is still doing in the present. His promise is that our acceptance and belief in the new covenant fulfilled in his beloved Son makes available to us his almighty power as we face life; gives us confidence that he knows all

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our circumstances; and his presence via the Holy Spirit will always be with us. As promised in Jeremiah 24 under the new covenant— We are his people; He is our God - and no promise on earth can compare to this divine one.

**WEEK 3: DIVINE AGENT**

It is a sad fact today that Jesus is often dismissed, even by some theologians, as myth, legend, a moral philosopher or a figurehead created in the first century to persuade people to become Christians. So, it is heartening to be able to say ‘amen’ to a scholar who says that Christian mission and proclamation is not a myth, philosophy or religious or moral system, but human witness to the saving significance of Jesus Christ – 24:48. Acts 1-8. He adds that Luke testifies in the first 4 verses that his role as an Evangelist is to bear responsible testimony to what God has done in human history, in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Encouragement about Luke’s reliability also comes from another perspective on the first 4 verses. The way they are written is comparable to the language of academic discourse typical of ancient scientific treatises and historical records (Loveday Alexander). In other words, Luke followed the most respected academic practices of his day to present facts about an outstanding figure, whose impact in human history would outrival all others. In doing so, a priority concern was establishing Jesus’ identity and credentials, which as the slide shows is still ongoing, even with all our present knowledge and modern research.

Admittedly, getting an answer from Luke about Jesus’ identity does lead to a wee bit of a problem. Luke gives us two different perspectives which spill over into Acts and that can lead to some confusion. What Luke teaches us about Jesus requires us to be able to switch between the contemporary Jewish perspective and our own knowledge which comes from the combination of the Gospel, Acts and the other books of the New Testament. It’s not the easiest thing to navigate but hopefully Luke’s portrait of Jesus will become clearer if we bear this in mind.

The beginning and end of Luke’s Gospel gives us a perspective that was not shared by the people during Jesus’ earthly ministry. We in the 21<sup>st</sup> century relate primarily to the first two and the last chapter in the Gospel. We are of the post- crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost and apostolic preaching and teaching era. We identify easily with the first two chapters, for Luke provides us with God sending his Son into the world – a turning point in history. We believe in conception by the Holy Spirit, the virgin birth and especially the attributes of the baby to be born – Son of the Most High, Son of David, and an expression only used this once by Luke in the NT – a Saviour who is Christ the Lord. We accept these identities as evidence for Jesus’ divinity. But Jesus was also fully human and during his lifetime was believed to be only a human being, albeit with extraordinary gifts.

That means that the people of Jesus’ day had a different perception of the implications and significance of the titles we take for granted. People of that time were firmly attached to their perception of the OT Messiah. Yes, he would be an extraordinary human, sent from God. He would physically fulfil the nationalistic aspirations of the Jewish nation. These were expressed by Zechariah, Mary, Simeon and Anna in the first two chapters. But what their words point to is what Jesus will become, not how he was viewed by his contemporary generation.

The problem arises when we try to put ourselves in the situation of Jesus’ first century audience. What is so obvious to us now was not even remotely discernible to a people who were expecting a Messiah, who would be the descendant of their greatest king. He would do for the nation what

David had done. David had conquered and ruled an extensive kingdom. He had delivered Israel from all its foreign enemies and Israelite military might, wealth and culture continued through the reign of his successor Solomon. Israel was the Middle East ‘superpower’ of the period. Additionally, this Davidic Messiah would save the Jewish nation from all the other ills that afflicted it at the political and social levels. In theological terms this would lead to a permanent paradise and a restored relationship with Yahweh. That is what the Jews of the times were expecting to arrive immediately with the Messiah. Instead, they got Jesus – an itinerant preacher, teacher and miracle worker who had no intention of expelling the country’s Roman rulers to bring Israel once more to regional and world domination; or to deal finally and permanently with all the oppression, injustice and poverty that prevailed in contemporary society.

Is it therefore any wonder that John who was in prison sent his disciples to Jesus to ascertain if Jesus was the one whose coming he had heralded. Jesus was simply not the messianic saviour that was expected. If this was John’s dilemma try to put yourselves in the position of the people of Jesus’ time. Is it any wonder that people of Nazareth asked “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” when they were amazed at his authoritative teaching (4:22, 32). Others too were amazed. He was better than the teachers of the law and it is those experts in the law who also would question his identity and the source of his authority to speak and teach as he did (20:2). The Pharisees and scribes questioned who it was who claimed to be able to forgive sins in the case of the healing of the paralytic man in chapter 5. Jesus’ identity even caused Herod’s perplexity (9:9). Who was Jesus according to popular perception – John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the OT prophets returned to life? All this questioning meant that no one of Jesus’ contemporaries from the ruler of the Jews to the person in the street had any concept of his true identity in the sense that we have it today.

Eventually Jesus directly asks the disciples who they thought him to be. Luke 9:20 (NIV) But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered on behalf of the others, “God’s Messiah.” But significantly, the identity given to Jesus at this point in time was that of a God-appointed agent - the Messiah - who would deliver the people according to the Jewish meaning of that term. This perspective accounts for much of the disciples’ misunderstandings. These go beyond the Gospel into Acts for even as Jesus was preparing for ascension the disciples still asked Acts 1:6 (NIV) “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

It was only when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost that Jesus’ person and role in the concept of salvation ordained by God was recognised, understood and taught according to how we view these divine truths today.

Thus, from chapter 3 to chapter 23 Jesus’ identity created difficulty. Something more was needed to help the disciples and us to accept Jesus as the divine Son of God in human form. Luke takes us step by step to show that as the disciples learned more about Jesus they came to realise and believe that Jesus was God’s commissioned divine agent. They came to know, as confirmed by the transfiguration, that Jesus had been anointed with the full power and authority of God, for only the Messiah could have the wisdom in words and the miraculous healing power that he displayed. He was the One God commanded them to listen to. What they could not discern or understand in their current situation was that in God’s plan, much still had to be accomplished and achieved by Jesus as the Messiah before God’s salvific promises would be realised.

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Until that would happen, Luke provides other pointers to Jesus' identity through his character and ministry. People had no excuse for scepticism, doubt or rejection. Jesus showed by word and deed that he was a unique individual who had extraordinary credentials in terms of power and authority, which even his opponents were forced to recognise.

During his lifetime the most significant description given to Jesus was that of a prophet and this designation is exclusive to Luke's Gospel. It was also accepted by Jesus since his opening words in his first public appearance claimed the Spirit of the Lord was on him – the authentication of the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist and now Jesus. Indeed, his rejection at Nazareth in chapter 4 led to his statement that no prophet is accepted in his hometown, signalling that he would encounter the same rejection as the prophets of old. On his way to Jerusalem Jesus stated that no prophet would die outside of Jerusalem. The precedent for this statement came in his previous 'Woe' to the Pharisees about the prophets that people like them had rejected and killed in the past. When Jesus raised the widow of Nain's son from the dead those who witnessed it (7:16) glorified God, saying, that a great prophet had risen up among them and that God hath visited his people. This testimony was endorsed by the Emmaus Road disciples also only recorded in Luke. For them Jesus was (24:19) was a prophet, mighty in deed and word before God and all the people.

So why did people not accept him as such? On this popular recognition of Jesus as a prophet you would have thought, that as the spokesperson sent by God with explicit authority to forthtell and foretell the message God wanted them to hear, that the people, especially the religious authorities, should have given more credence and recognition of this divinely appointed task. Instead, the religious leaders questioned his authority to speak and act as he did, thereby implying that his ministry had no connection to God and that he was only promoting his own human abilities for his own benefit. Underlying their criticism, opposition and rejection was Jesus' challenge to their own teaching. Jesus even corrected the religious teachers when he challenged the criticisms of the Pharisees and Scribes regarding Sabbath observance. Their rules and regulations prevented doing good to a human being on the Sabbath when even they made exceptions for animals to be watered or rescued from danger on that day. He reminded the Sadducees who did not believe in resurrection that God had told Moses he was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – that he was the God of the living, not the dead. The religious authorities knew Jesus was sending them a warning in the parable of the tenants who abused the owner of the vineyard's messengers and finally killed his son. But they went on to crucify him anyway.

Jesus spoke as a divinely commissioned prophet and that is what makes him still regarded as one of the most inspirational moral and spiritual teachers of all time. The Sermon on the plain is a God-designed and desired discipleship manual. In parables Jesus taught divine truths about the in-breaking of the kingdom of God in his ministry. He taught about concern for neighbours regardless of race and status – what was important was seeing a need and responding to it. He taught about God seeking the lost in parables of the lost sheep, coin and son and how God welcomed every repentant sinner regardless of how deeply they had offended him. He taught in parables about the coming judgement in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus and the welcome believers would receive at the great heavenly banquet when God's planned kingdom was eternally consummated. He also rebuked people about living lives without reference to God in the parable of the rich fool who thought his whole future was secured by his abundant harvest. Like the Old Testament prophets he perpetuated the message of the rewards of repentance and turning to God through him; and the judgement and punishment of those who rejected him.

Then there are his predictions of his own suffering, his death and resurrection together with the signs of the end times and the destruction of Jerusalem. At the Last Supper he spoke of the new covenant in his blood first prophesied by Jeremiah (31). Sadly then, as now, the acknowledged authority of his words, especially his declaration that acceptance or rejection of them also applied to acceptance or rejection of God. They were not and are still not taken as seriously as they should. Every word spoken by Jesus and recorded in Luke's Gospel underscores a new message for a new era which people needed to heed. Such was their importance that the disciples sent out on mission were instructed to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God as demonstrated in the words and actions of Jesus.

And as if further proof was needed the miracles which accompanied the words lent further emphasis to Jesus' divine messianic presence, especially when he authorised and empowered his disciples to do the same works that he did in healing the sick and casting out demons. Jesus' deeds are for Luke the evidence of the arrival messianic age in the Person and ministry of Jesus – a ministry characterised by love and compassion for ordinary people in difficult circumstances and in need of a Saviour. The miracles were the tangible proof of this. Miracles like the catch of fish, the calming of the storm the feeding of the 5000 were augmented by various healings and the raising of Jairus' daughter and the widow of Nain's son from the dead. These are all remarkable in that some were also associated with the forgiveness of sins and evidence of faith.

But in particular, Jesus' temptation and the exorcisms he performed showed his power over all demonic spirits including Satan. The temptation showed that even the Devil himself was not a match for Jesus. Jesus claimed the power of God for this truth when he was charged with casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub. For Luke, implicit in the visual demonstration of this power was the action of God reasserting through Jesus his reclaiming of this present world in preparation for the next where Satan and all forms of the evil spawned by his demonic agents would be excluded forever. Even the demons recognised this referring to Jesus as the 'Holy One of God, Son of the Most High God' – 4:34; 8:28

However, in focusing on the miracles we sometimes fail to recognise that the most important acts of Jesus concerned his willing endurance of suffering and death followed by resurrection and ascension. These things are what changed perspectives of the Messiah from the OT beliefs to the NT ones of Saviour and Lord. In the OT there was no concept of a suffering Messiah. That is why the disciples just could not understand why Jesus, whom they believed to be the Messiah, was intent on going to Jerusalem where he knew he would be killed. Many people of the time viewed Jesus as an imposter for the Messiah was immortal, he could not die. Instead, Luke brings out the Suffering Servant motif in Isaiah and applies it to Jesus. Luke does not comment on the significance of Jesus' death – which to be fair, would not have been generally understood when the crucifixion actually happened. What he emphasises by the record of this event is that it was a God-ordained necessity for salvation to be accomplished.

Luke makes up for lack of detail about Jesus's death by his unprecedented coverage to the resurrection. For him, the resurrection was proof of all things that he had written about Jesus. – the things surely believed by his community. Jesus had been born, lived and died according to God's purposes and his resurrection was God's vindication of the Person and his life.

The resurrection was followed by the ascension which, for Luke, categorically proved all that he wrote about Jesus was divine truth. Jesus enters the Gospel to all intents and purposes as a normal human baby. He leaves it as the exalted Lord of all, on whom acceptance or rejection will determine a person's eternal destiny. Acts begins where Luke ends – with Jesus- ascending

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into heaven. It is the climax of his life on earth, but at the same time it is the beginning of the new kingdom age when God's rule on earth through the dynamic of the Holy Spirit will manifest itself in the lives of believers.

To sum up, Luke's picture of Jesus presents him as the divine agent appointed by God to provide the means of salvation for the whole world. Divine truth for Luke is that Jesus is the fulfilment of God's promise of the divine Saviour who is Christ the Lord. In human form, Jesus is the pivotal figure in salvation history. Jesus is the centre of that history, the transition from one epoch to another. Jesus is the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies on the one hand; and on the other hand, is the inaugurator of the new covenant era. Luke therefore gives us the certainty that all Jesus fulfilled in the past guarantees the divine promise of what will be fulfilled in the future when he returns again in glory. On that day, no one will be in any doubt about his identity.

**WEEK 4:                    DIVINE KINGDOM**

So far we have seen from the examples of Luke's portrayal of both God and Jesus, that he gives us certainty that God's planned and promised salvation for the world, was to be accomplished and achieved through the life and work of his divine agent - Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah/Saviour. We saw that Jesus completed his task through death and resurrection and left the Gospel as the exalted Lord who would be proclaimed as Lord and Saviour by the disciples in the book of Acts. Their proclamation, enabled and empowered through the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus before he ascended into heaven, led to the church which has now existed for just short of 2000 years. Luke's assertion that all God's promises will be fulfilled is based on another element in God's plan, which is mentioned by Jesus 32 times in the Gospel. Both the present and the eternal future of God's plan is encapsulated in the concept 'the kingdom of God'. The result of this is that the present dawning of the kingdom is the key to understanding the main themes in Matthew and Mark as well as in Luke.

It has to be admitted that there are many interpretations of this concept and there is much academic debate about it. As yet, there is no exact and comprehensive definition of the term. But each of the evangelists give us indications of what it means in terms of God's and Jesus' joint roles in establishing it - and what its basic characteristics are. That means that each of the references has to be looked at in the contexts of the passages in which they appear.

So, what can we discover about the kingdom of God in Luke? We discover that right from the start of Jesus' public ministry, his words as well as his deeds - relate in one way or another, implicitly and explicitly, to the announcement of the dawning of the kingdom. His deeds manifest the arrival of the kingdom; his words define it.

First of all it was the essence of Jesus' preaching ministry. When you compare Jesus' message with that of John the Baptist - you find that John focused on repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins. While repentance and forgiveness of sins appear in Jesus' teaching, baptism does not reappear until the emergence of the early church. Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry made it clear to the people of Capernaum (4:43) that the coming of the kingdom of God was the key to all that he said and did. When they wanted to keep Jesus in the town because of the miracles he had performed there, Jesus refused to stay giving the reason

4:43 *“I must (δεῖ) proclaim the good news of the KINGDOM OF GOD to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.*

This verse sets the pattern for the rest of the references to the kingdom in the Gospel. Two points are significant. This was not an option for Jesus. It was something he ‘must’ do, the force of the verb stressing the necessity for him to preach this message to other towns. This was the same word used by the 12-year-old Jesus when he told his parents that he ‘must’ be about his Father’s business. It is a word which will appear time and time again in Luke especially as Jesus predicts his suffering and death as a ‘necessary’ event in order to accomplish the task for which he was sent. The second and obvious point is that Jesus was sent by God to preach this particular message.

Here is a picture of the joint work of God and His Messiah to bring a sinful humanity into fellowship with God and other believers - in a kingdom ruled by God.

Now, given that there is no exact definition of the term how are we supposed to recognise its coming or its arrival?

This question can be answered by the situation in Jesus’ own time. Because the Jews, including Jesus’ disciples, expected an immediate physical manifestation of God’s kingdom on earth, the Pharisees asked this very question of Jesus (17:20-21) and, as mentioned last week, the disciples asked about the restoration of the kingdom just before Jesus ascended into heaven – Acts 1:6. Jesus told the Pharisees in the hearing of his disciples that the kingdom was something that could not be observed because it is not an external but an internal phenomenon. The kingdom was not to be understood as a physical realm but was the personal sense of one’s life being ruled by the word and will of God - and lived according to them. As in every reference Jesus makes, he points to the fact that God’s reign had not only ‘drawn near,’ but was already present in terms of the contemporary form of faith and obedience to his word.

In this context, Jesus is telling the Pharisees that the term points to his divinely appointed task to inaugurate and establish the foundations of what that word and will were in relation to salvation. God’s salvation required a fundamental and radical internal readjustment of mind and will through belief and faith in His Messiah. That is still the only basis for entry into His kingdom in this present age and for the possession of eternal citizenship within it. Jesus’ emphasis on an internal reformation was particularly relevant to the religious authorities. In particular, the Pharisees and Scribes persistently opposed Jesus throughout his ministry and refused to acknowledge or accept him as God’s agent. By rejecting his legitimacy as God’s spokesperson, they likewise rejected his teaching about the way of salvation he offered them. Refusal to enter the kingdom - on God’s terms - in the present - would determine their exclusion from the future eternal kingdom. Jesus made this clear very graphically when he told the Jews, who believed they had an automatic right as God’s people to enter his kingdom that

13:28 *“There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out.*

These words indicate that responses to the Person of Jesus and his teaching was fundamental to present salvation. A negative response indicated that a person had not entered the kingdom in this life and would be excluded from the eternal one in the next. In contrast, those who accepted him as sent from God and who proved their commitment by obeying and following God’s ways in the present, could look forward to joining the people in chapter 13 who come from east and

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west and north and south, - and would take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. (13:29). Luke offers only the certainty of judgement and exclusion from God's eternal kingdom for those who reject Jesus. But for those who accept him from his own day to our own, he gives tremendous assurance.

As we look around our country, the western world in general and the parts of the world controlled by anti-Christian and atheist regimes, it is easy to despair about how the kingdom of God will grow any further. Two parables can put our minds at rest. The parable of the mustard seed shows that something that started off very small will grow until it is able to give shelter to the birds of sky - an image of countless numbers - for no one can even estimate how many birds are presently on our planet. In contrast to the Jewish expectation of the quick establishment of a powerful, comprehensively present kingdom, the kingdom comes gradually and will culminate in a total presence in the age to come. Luke shows that the in-breaking of that future existence came into our world in the presence of Jesus. It will continue to grow while the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached in the world.

The parable of the leaven also teaches the growth of the kingdom is a hidden but pervasive divinely controlled process. It may appear small and insignificant now. It looks deceptively weak. However, while this earth remains the kingdom will continue to grow and these parables remind us to trust the God who knows what he is doing and has the power to do it. God is the Lord of the harvest - he controls its growth. Our job is to continue sow the seed and witness to the kingdom by the way we live our lives. What the kingdom appears like now is not how it will end - we can be certain of that.

Luke then goes on to show us evidence of the kingdom's arrival with Jesus. The ministry of Jesus to the crowds and that of the disciples he sent on mission was to preach the coming of the kingdom and to heal the sick.

It is clear that the power Jesus gave to his disciples was delegated by the authority of God since the source of Jesus' power to do so came from God. The preaching of the kingdom was directly connected with healing miracles. From references to this connection in the rest of the Gospel it is clear that the healing performed by Jesus and the disciples was the tangible evidence of the truth of what Jesus had spoken in the sermon at Nazareth (chp. 4). The Spirit of the Lord was upon him empowering all that he said and did - which included healing but also preaching good news to the poor and setting captives free. It was also the tangible sign of John's preaching of the coming One who would begin the kingdom's entry and operation in the world. But because Jesus was not what people of the time expected this fact was not immediately recognised or believed. As mentioned before, even John himself needed confirmation of Jesus' messianic credentials. The proof Jesus demonstrated was the miracles and the preaching of the good news that God would accept all those who believed in his Messiah. - 7:22. We cannot estimate how this message alone would have been received by those whom the religious authorities of the day dismissed as unworthy of God's attention and care - and who they were convinced would have no place when his kingdom was established.

More significantly in relation to the coming of the kingdom was the exorcisms of evil spirits. I did speak of this last week but it also has a direct bearing on kingdom teaching.

*Luke 11:20 (NIV) 26 But if I drive out demons by the finger of GOD, then the KINGDOM OF GOD has come upon you.*

The context of this announcement was the charge after Jesus had cast out a spirit that had made a man mute. When the crowd heard the man speak they charged Jesus with being able to cast out the demon by the power of Beelzebub. Jesus stated that it was illogical for Beelzebub to attack his own agents. Satan's kingdom could not stand if it was divided against itself. The logical conclusion was that if Satan was not responsible for Jesus' power, then the only alternative source of his power was God.

This exchange was very important for demonic power is a reality and will be used by Satan to hold people captive in his domain by addictions, the lure of worldly pursuits including fame, wealth, status and earthly power. In this sense, setting captives to these things free, removed them from the realm of Satan potentially into the kingdom of God. This was not just an earthly issue of good and evil or right and wrong. It had cosmic eternal significance. Jesus warned in this passage that failure to respond positively to him after being freed from a demon, posed a danger. Even to allow one demon a foothold would lead to it being joined by others and the person's condition becomes worse than it was originally. Our phrase about someone or something going from bad to worse through addiction or behaviour captures that idea.

But with the warning comes encouragement. The reality of the power of God and Satan is evident. Jesus power to cast out demons shows God's power over Satan and his agents. Regardless of how the image 'finger' of God is understood, the implication is the same. There is enough power in just God's 'finger' to defeat the power of evil. God's kingdom as inaugurated and demonstrated by Jesus in confronting and defeating evil spirits, serves notice that God will be the ultimate victor. Satan's defeat and fate are already decided. Divine truth makes certain that evil will not triumph over or derail the plan of God for the continuity of the kingdom on earth and the eternal establishment of his kingdom at the end of time.

That brings us to the big question. When will this happen? – the disciples were the first to ask this question in chapter 21. The answer is simple - we don't know and won't know. According to Jesus only God knows its timing.

All that we are certain of is that it will happen and Jesus provides us with teaching about this fact. In chapter 19:11 Luke records that Jesus told the parable of the talents - the final parable on the way to Jerusalem - because the people of the time including the disciples believed that God's kingdom would arrive when Jesus entered Jerusalem. The end of the age for them was imminent.

But the parable of the talents refutes this notion. It represents the interim between Jesus' resurrection and his return. The parable explicitly states

*Luke 19:12 (NIV) "A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return.*

It shows that the disciples' duty in this interim is to faithfully serve the absent king by making use of the gifts and responsibilities he has given. The central point in the parable is that Jesus was leaving the earth but would come back and people would be held to account in respect of their responses to him. This would include the stewardship of those who had committed themselves to follow him. We can understand the disciples' perplexity about the delay in setting up the kingdom because at this stage they have only an inkling of what will happen to Jesus in Jerusalem. Jesus' predictions of that have not sunk in. At this moment in time they do not know

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or understand that they will witness the death, resurrection and Jesus' 'going away' to receive a kingdom when he ascends to heaven.

In reply to the disciples' question about when this would be Jesus told them signs that would precede his return to earth in chapter 21. Many signs will signal the beginning of the end. The destruction of Jerusalem, false messianic claims, social chaos, natural disaster, even martyrdom are mentioned. Jesus insists, however that that nothing happens without divine knowledge or is beyond divine control. The kingdom of God is inaugurated and all that Jesus has prophesied points toward the arrival of the kingdom not only in present history but also in its fulness at the end of history. All that happens in between the two events is divinely designed necessity – these things must happen, including Jesus' suffering and death. – in order to achieve the redemption of humanity.

The final emphasis in Jesus' words about the kingdom of God was given at his trial before the Sanhedrin. In Luke 22:69 he told the Sanhedrin that the Son of Man would be seated at the right hand of almighty God.

This could only refer to a heavenly, not an earthly setting. The right hand of God symbolically is the place of sovereignty, the place of kingdom rule that Jesus shares with God. But as a result of that going away Jesus told his disciples in a previous promise in the same chapter that they would receive a special honour. Jesus said:

*Luke 22:29-30 (NIV) And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, 30 so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*

The fulfilment of God's promises brought by Jesus accordingly involves an overlap of the ages; the new has begun, but the old has not yet passed away. God's purposes have been fulfilled, but not consummated. Thus, the Jesus who announces the presence of the kingdom can also teach his disciples to pray in chapter 11, 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

That is probably the simplest and the best definition of the kingdom of God

## **WEEK 5: DIVINE CITIZENSHIP**

Last week we saw that the key theme in Jesus' preaching and teaching was the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. The salvific benefits of the kingdom were offered freely to all but entry into the kingdom had to be on God's terms. That raises the question of who, according to those terms, was eligible for kingdom citizenship? Today because Christianity is a splintered religion there are many answers to that question. The many voices coming from denominations, sects, cults, and break-away groups means the way into the kingdom is no longer clear-cut. Some depend on rituals; others follow a certain form of self-composed doctrine from just one part of Scripture. Others rely on rigorous enforcement of legalistic rules and regulations; or performing mandatory outreach ministries. Although this is a generalised picture, all these means are promoted as the way into the kingdom of God. That is why the Gospel of Luke is essential reading when faced with these claims. Luke not only makes it clear that citizenship of the kingdom is the only way to salvation, but also demonstrates eligibility is the responsibility of the individuals who accepted the principles in the messages of John the Baptist and Jesus in their times and who adhere to them since. When we read Luke we go to the certain source of divine

truth that brought the kingdom of God to earth in the emergence of the church, to the principles which ensured entry into the kingdom and to what was entailed in being a citizen of it.

Firstly, Luke clarifies for us who is not eligible for citizenship. The first group were the Jews who came to hear John the Baptist. When faced with his message they rejected it. They claimed descent from Abraham, to be God's chosen people and therefore had an automatic right of entry into the kingdom. They would not recognise either the need of repentance or baptism for the forgiveness of sins. In a sense, this is reflected today in the belief that God is the Father of all humankind and as he is the supreme God of love, he could not possibly refuse anyone entry into heaven. By basing entitlement to citizenship on an erroneous image of a one-dimensional God, totally at odds with the attributes of the God of the Bible, they exclude themselves from the kingdom.

The second group is the religious authorities particularly the Pharisees and scribes. They too refused John's message and instead, relied on their ethnic pedigree and upon their strict adherence to the Law of Moses as giving them right of entry into the kingdom. That this was completely wrong is found in Luke's recording of the parable of the tax collector and Pharisee who went to pray at the temple. The tax collector recognised his sin and need of God's grace. The Pharisee praised himself because of what he was doing for God. He was depending on his works to earn his citizenship. That too is seen by many today as the way into the kingdom

The third illustration concerns an individual and perhaps is the saddest case of all. The rich young ruler who came to Jesus asking what he had to do to inherit eternal life was a sincere seeker and morally upright in every way. We forget sometimes that there are many such people in our own day, but tragically, like this young man, make themselves ineligible for citizenship. The young man chose his wealth over Jesus. In other words he wanted one foot in the kingdom and the other foot in the world. Jesus said you can't have it both ways - in his words - You cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve God and money. – Luke 16:13.

Although manifested in different ways in our own time, these basic principles are still preventing many from entering the kingdom of God and becoming permanent citizens of it.

Thankfully Luke presents equally clearly what makes a person eligible to enter the kingdom and the principles for that start again with John the Baptist. Apart from the birth narratives, the first thing that we are told about John is that the word of God came to him- 3:2. It was this word urging repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins that prepared the way for the coming of Jesus. John's insistence on repentance, which entailed the acknowledgement of personal and national sin, prepared people for further revelation about how forgiveness of sin would lead the individual and the nation back to a proper and enduring relationship with Yahweh in his prophesied eternal kingdom. The people heard the call to repent - but did all who came to him really listen to that message? Or did it, as we say, 'go in one ear and out the other'? You see there is a difference between hearing something and really listening to what is said. And entry into the kingdom or exclusion from it is solely dependent on making that distinction.

Only some of the crowds that came to John proved they were really listening to his message. Those who really listened engaged their ears and minds and reflected on what was heard. That dual process led to the understanding that his message had significant implications in terms of how they lived their lives. Those who came to this conclusion realised that what John had told them required not just acceptance of the message but action to prove it had been accepted. Hence the question from some of the people, some tax collectors and soldiers – What must we

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do? Submission to baptism proved their sincerity; being willing to do what their new confession required brought them into the kingdom's orbit and prepared them for the further revelation Jesus would preach and teach.

That same principle of just hearing and/or really listening is further emphasized by Jesus in a very familiar parable – the parable of the Sower. Usually, more attention is paid to the yields or lack of them from the different types of soils the seed falls on, but there are very important statements in this parable that reinforce the process that John's ministry had already established. The first is that the Seed in the parable represents the word of God. Eligibility for citizenship - excuse the pun - is grounded in the word of God. As God's spokesperson every word Jesus spoke was God's message to the world. At the end of the parable Jesus told the crowd, including the disciples - he who has ears to hear, let him hear. Was Jesus simply telling them to hear what he said but to take no further notice of it? Of course not. These words contain a very serious instruction because, responding to his disciples' request for an explanation of the parable, he told them that it was knowledge of the kingdom being given to them. And after explaining it he gave the instruction

'take heed how you hear' according to the New King James Version and 'consider carefully how you listen' in the New International Version. Regardless of what version is used, the force of the words is the same – how a person hears or listens – involves thinking about what has been said and making a decision to either ignore it or accept it and adjust one's lifestyle accordingly.

Jesus was making the message of the kingdom public throughout the whole region of Palestine – from Galilee to Jerusalem and all points in between. Listening to his words was a serious business then and remains so now. One way or another a decision had to be made about their acceptance or rejection and the parable demonstrates that. There are the only two possible responses. Listening led to the belief that the Sower is telling the truth and this leads to action which produces fruit. Only hearing the word of God allowed other matters to take priority, and eventually what has been heard becomes useless and unproductive.

It is clear from both John and Jesus that simply hearing the word of God but doing nothing about it does not produce kingdom citizens. Citizens of the kingdom are those who do not allow what they hear to go in one ear and out the other – they use what's between those two ears to reflect on and study what has been said so that their lives can be shaped around it. Words must lead to action. And that is a principle that surfaces time and time again in Jesus' preaching and teaching.

Twice more Jesus linked listening to active obedience. When Jesus was told his mother and brothers wanted to see him but were prevented from doing so because of the crowd, Jesus gave what may seem to be a rude and harsh reply. He said in 8:21 - "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." Jesus had just told the parable of the Sower and the arrival of his family gave him an opportunity to enlarge on its teaching. Jesus was not dismissing his family or repudiating them in any way. All who hear and act on the word become part of Jesus' family, but the word is to have first priority and so one's allegiance is to its message, even over one's family. Furthermore, for Jesus there is no difference between God's word and his will. In terms of priority, the importance of both is encapsulated in our familiar hymn – trust and obey – for there is no other way. A similar declaration comes in chapter 11:27-28 when on his way to Jerusalem a woman in the crowd called out a blessing on Jesus' mother for bringing him into the world. Jesus replied "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it." Just these two statements leave Jesus' audience in no doubt that there is an

inextricable link between truly listening to God's word and the duty of a kingdom citizen to obey it.

It is obedience to the word that produces the fruit mentioned in the parable. Every true citizen of the kingdom will produce fruit in one form or another according to the gifts and the opportunities God provides to build up his kingdom. People are in the kingdom when they trust and obey the word of God, but not all citizens of the kingdom will produce the same level of fruit. The levels will sometimes depend on the amount of exposure a person has to the word of God. Sometimes, physical, mental or environmental circumstances will limit the yield of fruit that can be produced. But regardless of circumstances obedience to what is known and understood of God's will will produce some fruit.

Although the parable mentions quantities what is encouraging for all believers is that it is not the quantity of fruit produced that God considers, but quality of it. As Jesus says in 8:15, the right kind of fruit comes from the honesty and goodness of the heart that acted in response to his word. That is what counts with God. Fruit is the product of inner motivation that gives God's will and word priority in one's life; and then one's patience in holding fast to the word in obedience. Whatever the translation of verse 8:15 is used the meaning is clear. Citizens are the good soil who hold fast to the seed – the word of God - and persevere in witnessing to and obeying it. To retain the word points to clinging to the hope and the promise in it - especially when times are hard and difficulties arise. To do so with patience – a Greek word only used by Luke – is the quality of living faithfully while under pressure.

Just through the ministry of John and this parable of Jesus, Luke has shown that God's kingdom exists wherever people have heard the good news of its coming, have listened attentively to what has been said about it and who take responsibility to act on the basis of and consistent with what is 'heard'. Citizenship depends on the response made to this formula for entering the kingdom and being assured of one's place in it. And in showing how people themselves are responsible for making themselves eligible for kingdom citizenship or excluding themselves from it, Luke reports a further strongly explicit statement regarding the necessity of following the principles of listening to the word and obeying it.

Before Jesus sent his disciples out on mission recorded in chapter 10, he told them to pray to the Lord of the Harvest because the world needed to hear the good news of the kingdom. At the same time he indicated that not everyone would heed what they had to say. "Whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me; but whoever rejects me rejects him who sent me." God governs what happens in the mission field. His word as broadcast by Jesus and the disciples required a response. The message is uncompromising. To refuse to hear what Jesus says constitutes a rejection of him. Whoever rejects Jesus rejects the God who sent him. In terms of citizenship nothing could be more important than the choice people were presented with when it came to listening to Jesus. Rejection of his words was a rejection of God who had given the command to the disciples when they witnessed his transfiguration and heard the voice from the cloud saying - "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." Luke 9:35. God's command was emphatic. Jesus spoke exactly what God wanted him to say. Jesus himself affirmed that when he said

*Luke 21:33 (NIV) Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*

Jesus had the authority to make this exceptional claim because it had been endorsed and emphasised by the voice from heaven at the transfiguration. In hearing it, Peter, James and John

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were not just the representatives of the apostolic band. They represented the pioneers of missionary activity through the listening and acting on Jesus' words. As a result of that listening and obedience to all Jesus said, two thousand years later those words still retain their power, authority and relevance for salvation. They also characterise the response of all disciples since and those in our present and future generations who have entered, or will enter the kingdom, because of truly listening to the message first proclaimed by Jesus. Today we owe a great debt of gratitude to those from the time of the apostolic mission and through the centuries who have faithfully and correctly preached, taught and obeyed the word in many different locations, situations and circumstances. It is the fruit of their labours that has enabled us, in our time, to enter into the kingdom of God.

So then, the Gospel of Luke, having given us all of this guidance on eligibility and responsibility in relation to citizenship, to use a common expression – now puts the ball firmly in our court. It is up to us to honour our legacy in terms of obedience to God's will through the same Holy Spirit given to the original preachers, teachers and disciples of the word.

God through Jesus has done everything necessary to make citizenship of his kingdom available to everyone in every age. The kingdom came at the expense of his beloved Son suffering the worst humiliation and death that humanity could inflict upon him. As citizens we show our gratitude and love to God the Father and God the Son through taking the messages they have given us to heart and faithfully serving them in the kingdom on earth in whatever capacity we have been placed

And there is one final example we can also follow. We can look at a very unlikely disciple of the time – Joseph of Arimathea – a dissenting member of the Council which sought Jesus' death. His redeeming feature was that he was waiting for the kingdom of God 23:51. This put Joseph in the same category as the 6 people in the first 2 chapters who were awaiting the fulfilment of Old Testament divine promises and covenants. Today we have seen how these were fulfilled by the coming of Jesus who is the Saviour who is Christ the Lord. And as citizens, we too are waiting for the day when the kingdom he inaugurated in the present time will be fully consummated at the end of the age. As the slide points out, living and waiting for more than the 'here and now' is something we citizens can be certain will arrive at God's appointed time.

### **WEEK 6: DIVINE FULFILLMENT**

The last of these notes from the Gospel of Luke is more or less a general summary of what Luke wants us to learn about God, Christ and people, including ourselves. As you will have gathered I no longer view the Gospels as simply the stories of Jesus in scenes by the wayside and tales of the sea. Yes, there are the stories, but they are stories told by Luke and his fellow evangelists with the intent of spreading the 'good news' of God's offering of salvation to the world. Luke's approach is different to Matthew and Mark in that he spells out this intent in the first four verses of his Gospel. He then goes beyond the life of Jesus in recording the emergence of the church which received that 'good news' in the book of Acts. Yet, Luke is also more than just the church historian. That is because the previous talks have shown that Luke's selected episodes from those times give us timeless, non-negotiable, theological truths that form the bedrock of our Christian faith. And like Theophilus and those 1<sup>st</sup> century believers, we Christians still need to be reminded and assured that what we have is truth – divine truth – on our side.

In this Gospel we are presented with these truths not as dry doctrine or dogma, but as they happened to ordinary people in the course of their daily lives. In Luke these truths are lived and emerge from the responses like those who appear in the first chapters and through the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. Luke presents us with theology as it was formed by the people, events and situations John and Jesus encountered.

Too often we think of theology in terms of Pauline or other doctrines found in the sermons in Acts, the other letters and Revelation, but essentially theology is learning what we can about the character and attributes of God the revelation of which starts in the Old Testament. Added to that is what he has done to enable humanity, through Christ, to enter into his kingdom here on earth, be given eternal life and be granted an eternal existence when this world comes to an end. Luke deals with these matters in recounting the interaction between God, His presence through Christ and the Holy Spirit, and people like us.

The first assertion Luke makes is that all theology starts with God. In the overall context of the Gospel one fact stands out. God is at work. He is the prime mover in and orchestrator of every detail of every episode that Luke records. And every detail is completely consistent with the covenantal promises and prophecies given centuries before these events. God is portrayed in the Gospel as all powerful, all-knowing and ever-present. The names and designations of God mentioned all point to the Creator God, who has total control over the natural world and its inhabitants and their destinies. The attributes of God pervade the narrative and no one is left in any doubt of the sovereign supremacy and powerful pre-eminence of God. It follows that all God has willed, planned, purposed and set in motion with the births of John and Jesus cannot fail. That is a certainty Luke has stressed for his audience.

The second assertion made is that God's programme is progressed through his Messiah – Jesus of Nazareth who takes centre stage in the narrative. By deliberately drawing attention to Jesus' identity Luke also challenges us to come to a decision about who we believe Jesus to be. Man? God? or both? He helps us by including numerous references which reinforce the fact that Jesus has come from God and is God's agent. Jesus' miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit makes him unique. His commissioning for his divine mission, attested by the voice from heaven and the Holy Spirit descending on him in the likeness of a dove at his baptism, endorses the uniqueness of his Person and his mission. That uniqueness is further attested by Jesus being personally confronted by God's arch enemy Satan in the temptation in the wilderness. Jesus' victory over him proved the stronger power of God which was further extended in the miracles of exorcism Jesus performed.

Then Luke gives us a glimpse of Jesus' glory in the mention of the transfiguration when God confirmed him as his chosen One to inaugurate and establish his kingdom on earth. Add to those events the practical aspects of Jesus' ministry. His teaching was recognised as superior to that of the religious authorities of the day. The miracles he performed had never been experienced to that degree before and have never been surpassed since. Finally, we are given the validation of the totality of Jesus' life, which is found in Luke's unprecedented coverage of his resurrection, followed by his ascension to take his place at the right hand of God – the place of sovereign power and authority.

A third assertion stems from these examples particularly from the individual profiles Luke gives of God and Jesus which present them as one in terms of glory, power and purpose. These are deployed in the ministry of Jesus to bridge the gap between a holy God and a sinful humanity. Jesus is both the means and the catalyst determining its eternal destiny

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Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross was the means of forging a new covenant whereby forgiveness of sins would be granted through belief that he died on the individual's behalf. He was a catalyst in that throughout his ministry he had repeatedly warned people that he was a divisive figure. There were only two choices – acceptance or rejection – respectively carrying the consequences of eternal salvation or eternal damnation. People did not like to hear those choices presented so starkly and so uncompromisingly. The same is true today. Our lost world needs our compassion and concern and the offer of salvation through Christ. But it still needs the warning of the consequences of rejecting it.

A fourth assertion is that in spite of the negative aspects of Jesus words the most positive and emphatic purpose statement was that Jesus had come to seek and save the lost. The foundational principle of repentance and turning away from sin had already been laid by John the Baptist. Jesus' ministry taught people what they should turn to if they accepted his invitation to become citizens of the kingdom he preached. The Sermon on the Plain gave promised blessing to those who were sincere in striving to mould their characters in the ways God approved of. The woes Luke includes, together with Jesus' rebukes especially to the religious authorities, identified what offended God. Then in practical terms Jesus in his encounter with the rich young ruler who asked what he had to do to inherit eternal life, referred specifically to the law which summed the whole of Mosaic law.

*Luke 10:27 (NIV) 27 He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'"*

For Jesus this was not just a dogmatic demand of Judaic law. Jesus proved his single-minded love and devotion to God when as a 12-year-old he declared that he must be about his Father's business. He lived that declaration by carrying out his Father's commission in word and deed even when it took him to the cross. Then he showed what loving one's neighbour really meant, not just in the parable of the Good Samaritan, but by real life examples. Jesus welcomed everyone in spite of knowing their motives in coming to him.

Think for a moment of the crowds who flocked to hear John and Jesus and the groups Jesus addressed. Doubtless many came simply out of curiosity to find out what the fuss was about. In Jesus' case, undoubtedly some came in the hope of being healed. Others like Herod wanted to see Jesus so that they could see a miracle being performed. Some came to find out if what was reputed of Jesus' words and works was true. Some like the people in the synagogue at Nazareth were impressed by his teaching, but when he told them things about their own religious views that they did not like they rejected him outright and even tried to kill him by throwing him off a cliff. In his lifetime Pharisees and scribes joined the crowds, coming only with the intention to criticise, challenge and try to trap him into incriminating himself so that they would have the opportunity to get rid of him and his teaching. Some like the religious authorities and the crowds they incited to call for Jesus' crucifixion, came to mock and scoff, especially as he hung on the cross. The crowd that had welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem as king were insisting he be put to death less than a week later. Collectively crowds and groups were fickle, but Jesus saw every single person in them as a potential citizen of the kingdom of God

The fifth assertion shows the kinds of individuals who emerged from the crowds who Jesus regarded as neighbours. In contravention of religious and social norms Jesus declared he had come to preach the good news to the poor both materially and in terms of status. He reached out

to women and children. He touched the dead in the raising of Jairus' daughter and the widow of Nain's son. He touched lepers and healed them. He associated with tax collectors calling Levi to be one of disciples. Zacchaeus admitted the extent of his extortion and fraud in collecting taxes, yet Jesus said salvation had come to him and his house. He even dined with Pharisees like Simon in spite of their hostility towards him, giving them the opportunity to change their hearts and minds. In his dying moments he extended salvation to a dying criminal.

And he further extended this blessing to those outside his intended ministry – to the Gentile Gerasene demoniac, the centurion at Capernaum, the Samaritan leper and potentially to the Roman centurion at the cross who gave testimony of the One he had just crucified that he was a righteous man. In other words, he believed Jesus was a man of God, therefore innocent of any wrongdoing.

What connected all these people was the belief and faith in what they were hearing and seeing of God and Jesus. We see examples first in the complete acceptance of God's word by Mary, Elizabeth, the shepherds, Simeon and Anna. In Jesus' ministry Luke demonstrates it in Jesus commending the faith of the friends and the paralytic man they lowered through the roof so that Jesus could heal him. Also, in the expression of the centurion at Capernaum who recognised Jesus was the representative of a higher authority implicitly indicating he was God's agent. Faith was shown in the courage of the ceremonially unclean woman who risked punishment by the authorities, not to mention the anger or abuse of the crowd, just to be able to touch the hem of his garment. And that of the Samaritan leper – a foreigner in Jesus' words. In all the episodes mentioned Jesus is shown to have practiced what he preached and in doing so brought people into the kingdom

And the sixth assertion follows from what has been said about people who had faith and believed; and it is one that brings great comfort to us all. What all the people mentioned in the Gospel, including the disciples, had in common was that none of them was perfect. All who chose God's and Jesus' way came with their human strengths and weaknesses, faith and failings. From the very first chapter Luke does not hide the types of people who, in spite of their imperfections, still by belief and faith obtained God's acceptance and blessing. Take Zechariah first. He was a true and faithful believer in the OT sense of that word. He had persevered in his belief and trusted that God would fulfil all he had promised in spite of 400 years of prophetic silence. As an elderly and blameless priest, he had served God all his life. However, in what would have been the highest point of his close relationship with God, he doubted God's word. Staunch belief in God's word does not make, even someone of the stature of Zechariah, immune from occasional doubt. The birth of John brought that doubt to an end and Zechariah's song showed he emerged with an even stronger belief in what God was doing for him and Elizabeth and indeed for the whole nation of Israel. Luke's recording of this temporary lapse of faith makes us aware that we are human and need to honestly admit doubts. The mention of this one defect on this momentous occasion helps us to realise that whether under the Old Testament covenants or the New Testament one, even the best of us is not perfect. We are all prone to doubt God's existence, presence, intentions or provision, especially when times are difficult or when we are confused over circumstances in our lives. But it is the same Holy Spirit that enabled Zechariah to overcome his doubt and to see the bigger picture of what John's birth would mean for the coming of the Messiah, that is available to us today to deal with any doubts or confusion we may have about our faith.

Then take the disciples. When Peter came face to face with Jesus after the miraculous catch of fish he fell at Jesus' feet and said

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*Luke 5:8 (NIV) "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"*

Yet Jesus accepted him as a disciple knowing that in spite of his later sincere confession that Jesus was the Christ, Peter would, when the pressure came, deny him three times.

And when the storm came on the lake of Galilee and the disciples panicked. Jesus asked them  
*Luke 8:25 (NIV) 25 "Where is your faith?" ....*

In fact, as his constant companions during the whole of his three-year ministry, despite all they had seen and heard, they continued to have a tenuous grasp of implications of Jesus' mission from God, especially when they finally realised that he was going to Jerusalem to die.

The fact implicit in just these examples show we live in a fallen world where sin is rampant and life circumstances don't always work the way we think they should. Both affect our thoughts, words and deeds. And this is a something that will affect us throughout the whole of our Christian lives because Jesus told his disciples in 17:1

*"Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come....,*

Knowing that he taught them to pray not to be led into temptation but to be delivered from the evil one. Temptation will come all through our lives to live contrary to what God wants us to be and to do. But the prayer also includes the petition to forgive those sins on the condition we forgive others theirs. As Christians that does not make us perfect – it just makes us forgiven. The good news is that God is ready to grant us that forgiveness throughout our lives when genuine repentance and turning away from the offence is manifested in our attitudes and behaviour.

In conclusion, these assertions in the Gospel about God, about Jesus and about their relationship with people, helps us to understand that Christianity is not just about religious words that have to be believed and collectively followed. It is divine truth based on the formation of an individual's living relationship with God through a living Saviour that is directly related to the way we live each day. To have that relationship all we have to do is to bring two things. First our faith which seems to be explained simply in this verse of a Michael Card song

To hear with my heart; to see with my soul.  
To be guided by a hand I cannot hold,  
To trust in a way that I cannot see  
That's what faith must be.

Secondly to bring ourselves humbly 'just as I am without one plea but that his blood was shed for me – willing to be trained, just as Jesus trained his disciples to be witnesses to the redemptive power and purpose of God, through Christ, to establish his kingdom on earth and eventually eternally in heaven.

This is the good news Luke records for us and it is historically and theologically sound. So, as we face what this coming year with all its continuing uncertainty will bring, I hope that what Luke has taught us will go some way to keeping alive our hopes and expectations of the better world Jesus said God would one day deliver to and for us – for when all is said and done, that will be the ultimate fulfilment of divine truth.

