

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 22 January 2012

No. T0712

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Forgotten Lives of the New Testament: Luke the Friend

In the Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) lessons in primary schools, children are often asked to write down the characteristics of a friend with a view to producing an acrostic or an alphabetical poem. I wonder which words you would select to describe a friend. Here are some that I've gathered to form an acrostic of the word "Friendship".

Friends are:

Forgiving
Reliable
Intant
Encouraging
Neighbourly
Discerning
Selfless
Honest
Interesting
Peace-loving

The title of our talk for today is "Luke, the Friend" and I wonder how many of the previously-mentioned adjectives could be used to describe him.

The name "Luke" means "light-giving" or "luminous" and he has lived up to his name in giving us the historical record of the early church in the book commonly called "The Acts of the Apostles" and, also, in the beautiful gospel that speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ in the perfection of His manhood. The latter is entitled "The Gospel According to St. Luke" in the Authorised Version of the Bible. It is important to see from the outset that both books were written as God revealed these things to Luke by the power of His Spirit. They form part of the God-given scriptures.

His name is an abbreviation of "Lucanus" which makes some believe that he was Greek. However, even though he was a native of Antioch, in Syria, we cannot say (with certainty) that he was a Gentile. He may well have moved there when many Jews left Israel in the days of a previous dispersion.

In Colossians 4:14 Paul speaks of him as a "the beloved physician." The adjective "beloved" shows how dear he was to Paul and others. He was a man who was easy to both love and to like. He was also a doctor, revealing him to be both intelligent and caring. The direct article "the" indicates that **he**, in particular, was well known for these characteristics. Furthermore, Luke would have been able to use his medical and literary skills to advance the Gospel of God. His profession suggests that he may well have been a wealthy man who used some of his riches in the service of God. This shows that he was a faithful man prepared to make personal sacrifices.

In Philemon 24 we see that he travelled with Paul as a fellow labourer. He shared the apostle's commission given by the Lord Himself as listed in Acts 26:16-18: "But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me." It is for this cause that many believe that his Gospel was written with a Gentile audience in mind.

The closeness of Luke to the apostle Paul may be seen in his gospel in that there is a clear parallel between the teaching of both men. If, in Philippians 2:7, Paul wrote that the Lord Jesus was made in the likeness of men, then Luke gives us detail of Christ being found in fashion as a man in Luke 1:1-3:38. Furthermore, we find in Luke 4:1-13, Jesus being tempted by the devil. This relates to Paul's teaching in Hebrews 4:13 where we read of Jesus being tempted in the same manner as we are. In Luke 4:14 to 19:28 we find Jesus touched with the feelings of our infirmities. This parallels the teaching of Paul in Hebrews 4:14-15: "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest

which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin."

Luke 19:29-24:53 tells of Jesus as our Kinsman-Redeemer and of Him as Man in His resurrection and His ascension. These are two of the main themes of the apostle Paul throughout his epistles. The fellowship of both, therefore, may be discovered in their written works. However, as stated previously, it was really the Spirit of God that generated the writings through these chosen vessels: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God..." (2 Timothy 3:16).

It is clear that Luke was a man of learning and a faithful recorder of that which God revealed to him. His medical training had taught him how to be exact. He is one of the most reliable historians of ancient times. (Luke 1:1-3; Acts 1:1-3). His gospel is the most literary of the four found in the New Testament and it is a wonderful book to read.

It is in Acts 16:10 where Luke first uses the pronoun "we" showing that he was present with Paul and his team at Troas. We can take up his account from Acts 16:8: "And they passing by Mysia came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; there stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us. And after he had seen the vision, immediately **we** endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called **us** for to preach the gospel unto them." (Acts 16:8-10)

From this passage, we can determine that Luke was not only present with Paul at this time; but had full confidence in the apostle. The vision had been Paul's. He must have described it to those who accompanied him. His word was taken as being true because they were prepared to go to Macedonia immediately.

The words of Luke in describing the calling are beautiful, namely: "... assuredly gathering that the Lord had called **us** for to preach the gospel unto them." (Acts 16:10) They were absolutely convinced that this was the will of the Lord. The calling united the team of workers with the express purpose of preaching the good tidings to the Macedonians. In passing, it is worthy of note that here, and in other places, Luke does not mention himself specifically. In his accounts, he remains in the background. This tells us that he was a modest man.

The next section shows Luke's eye for detail as he summarises the journey: "Therefore loosing from Troas, **we** came with a straight course to Samothracia, and the next day to Neapolis; and from thence to Philippi, which is the chief city of that part of Macedonia, and a colony: and **we** were in that city abiding certain days." (Acts 16:11-12)

We are not told how these journeys were financed, but we know that Paul was a tent-maker and would work many extra hours in order to provide for the needs of his team. As a physician, Luke may have laboured in a similar way in order to support the Lord's work. There is little doubt that the whole team would have used their skills where possible to support themselves. Paul's words to the Thessalonian believers echoes this spirit: "But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children: so being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us. For ye remember, brethren, our labour and travail: for labouring night and day, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God." (1 Thessalonians 1:7-9)

This is singularly important because Paul had an untiring zeal in his labours and yet he was not a healthy man. Besides the thorn in the flesh that he had (2 Corinthians 12:7-10), his bodily presence was weak (2 Corinthians 10:10) and he was often subject to the infirmities of the flesh. This is another reason why Luke was important to the apostle. He could tend and care for him. No doubt, God provided Luke for this very purpose. At the same time, we can see that the sign gifts of miracles, including healings, were not always available in the will of God for believers at that time.

Returning to Acts 16:13 we read: "And on the sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made; and we sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted thither." Again, we see the unity expressed in the word "we" - "we went; we sat down; we spoke."

It would seem that there was no synagogue in Philippi. This may have been because it was a Roman colony and could not support the three Rabbis and further ten male officers normally required to run one. So we find that a river bank was a place where people assembled to pray. The words of Luke reveal that it was a place which the women frequented, possibly, for that very purpose. Hence, we find that prayer was important to the apostle Paul and his team. From this, we may safely deduce that Luke, himself, was a man of prayer.

It must have rejoiced the heart of Luke to write about Lydia in Acts 16:14-15 "And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul. And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us."

Luke then records an incident as an observer when he writes: "And it came to pass, as we went to prayer, a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination met us, which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying: the same followed Paul and us, and cried, saying, These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation. And this did she many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour" Acts 16:16-18.

It is probably insecure to accept the witness of a spirit-possessed woman; but if she spoke truly, it was evident that Luke was among those classed as "servants of the most high God" and those showing "the way of salvation" (Acts 16:17). Paul himself, probably, showed great forbearance before using the authority of His Lord to command the spirit to leave this woman.

Luke continues his report by stating events most of which he, himself may have observed. He writes: "And when her masters saw that the hope of their gains was gone, they caught Paul and Silas, and drew them into the marketplace unto the rulers, and brought them to the magistrates, saying, These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city, and teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans. And the multitude rose up together against them: and the magistrates rent off their clothes, and commanded to beat them. And when they had laid many stripes upon them, they cast them into prison, charging the jailor to keep them safely: who, having received such a charge, thrust them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks." (Acts 16:19-24)

In order to write the details of the events that followed, he may have talked to various people because he writes: "And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed. And the keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, he drew out his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled. But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here. Then he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway. And when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced, believing in God with all his house." (Acts 16:25-34)

Later, Luke seems to have separated from Paul at Philippi when Paul went on to Asia and they do not join up again until at Troas in Acts 20. Here he records the incident where Eutychus fell asleep while sitting on a window ledge and fell. He was taken up dead, but the apostle Paul embraced him and said, "Trouble not yourselves; for his life is in him." (Acts 20:11) So it was.

In Acts 20:13 we find Luke sailing to Assos, whereas Paul travelled there on foot. Meeting up again, they began to sail for Jerusalem for Pentecost. Paul wanted to speak to the elders of the Ephesian assembly, so they stopped at Miletus and sent for them. Luke records how passionately Paul warned the elders about wolves (enemies of the cross) who would attack their company in order to destroy the faith of believers and, also, of men within the assembly who would seek to draw the Christians after themselves causing division. He also mentioned the fact that the Spirit Himself had witness that bonds and afflictions awaited him.

Luke concludes this episode by tenderly, yet succinctly, writing: "And when he had thus spoken, he kneeled down, and prayed with them all. And they all wept sore, and fell on Paul's neck, and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spake, that they should see his face no more. And they accompanied him unto the ship." (Acts 20:36-38)

They then sailed via Tyre to Ptolemais from whence Paul's company left the apostle and travelled to Caesarea where they stayed with Philip the evangelist for a good while (Acts 21:8). During their stay, a prophet named Agabus, came to them from Judaea. Luke writes: "And when he was come unto us, he took Paul's girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles." Everyone tried to persuade the apostle not to go. Luke records his words: "What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." (Acts 21:11-13) Noting the determination of the apostle, they ceased their efforts to deter him and bowed to the will of the Lord.

It was not long after reaching Jerusalem that Paul was falsely accused by antagonistic Jews and beaten. (Acts 21:27-34) A Roman chiliarch called Claudius Lysias intervened and took Paul into custody. He allowed Paul to speak in his own defence and Luke records the wonderful testimony of the apostle to God's grace (Acts 22:1-21). This chief captain sentenced that he should be scourged. At that point, the apostle mentioned his Roman citizenship and the chief captain feared reprisals for binding him (Acts 21:39). So he arranged for Paul to stand before the Jewish leaders in order to ascertain any charges that could be brought. Once there, Paul brought up the question of resurrection and

immediately the Pharisees and Sadducees started arguing among themselves - the Pharisees believing in resurrection, but the Sadducees denying it. Paul was again delivered from the mêlée by the chief captain.

It was then Luke wrote about a conspiracy to murder the apostle when he next appeared before the council. A young man had overheard forty Jews swear an oath to ambush and slay the apostle (Acts 23:11-22). He reported this to Claudius who arranged for the apostle to go to Felix who was the governor. Under Roman escort, Paul travelled safely through the night and was brought before the governor (Acts 23:23-35). He was given opportunities by the Lord, firstly in a formal way as he defended himself again (Acts 24:10-23); but, secondly, in a personal way as he spoke with Felix and his wife privately (Acts 24:24-26). Luke himself, must have regularly visited Paul the prisoner in order to gain this information. A friend in need is a friend indeed.

A few years passed along with Paul's defence before Festus (procurator of Judaea) and Agrippa (ruler over parts of North East Palestine). It was at this point that the bold witness resulted in Festus declaring Paul to be mad; but occasioned the well-known words from Agrippa: "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." (Acts 26:28) The two men agreed together that Paul could have been set free had he not already appealed to Caesar. (Acts 26:32) Instead, he was committed to a centurion called Julius with a view to transporting him to Rome. The remarkable thing was - Luke was there with him. For the time Paul was imprisoned, Luke had remained faithful to his friend.

In Acts 27, Luke carefully records the voyages made towards Italy. At a place known as "The Fair Havens" near the city of Lasea (Acts 27:8), It was here, Luke records the warning given by Paul to the ship's company: "Sirs, I perceive that this voyage will be with hurt and much damage, not only of the lading and ship, but also of our lives." (Acts 27:10) The master and owner of the ship did not heed the warning and Julius, the centurion, believed the ship's owner rather than Paul. Luke, knowing the truth of Paul could have left him at that moment; but he didn't. He was prepared to face extreme difficulties with him.

Anyway, this resulted in them heading for Phenice in Crete. But, the ship's master had not reckoned on a tempestuous wind, called Euroclydon which caught the vessel and drove it onward for three days. The master tried everything he could think of to preserve his ship; but it was hopeless. Luke then writes: "But after long abstinence Paul stood forth in the midst of them, and said, Sirs, ye should have hearkened unto me, and not have loosed from Crete, and to have gained this harm and loss. And now I exhort you to be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of any man's life among you, but of the ship. for there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve, saying, Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee. Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me. Howbeit we must be cast upon a certain island" Acts 27:21-26.

And so it was. On the fourteenth night, the ship stuck fast as they approached a creek in a country they later recognised as Melita (Malta). The ship quickly broke up; but all two-hundred-and-seventy-six souls made it to shore. The people of the island took care of them. (Acts 27:33-28:10)

Luke records what happened next in this way: "And the barbarous people shewed us no little kindness: for they kindled a fire, and received us every one, because of the present rain, and because of the cold. And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand. And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live." Acts 28:2-4

The viper on his hand hurts him not and Luke continues, "he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm. Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god." Acts 28:5-6

This makes you wonder what the reaction of the beloved physician was. There is no description of him helping Paul at all. Yet, you would think that he must have at least tried to do so. Some while later, Luke is not mentioned in the healing of the father of the island's chief - Publius. He simply writes of Paul, praying and laying hands on him. Hence, he was healed. Acts 28:8

Acts 28 describes further voyages that took Paul to Rome and Luke completes the book by writing: "And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him." Acts 28:30-31. Luke had been with the apostle through "thick and thin" right up to the end. The Lord Jesus calls those who obey Him, His friends. I wonder if we can be as faithful to our Lord as Luke was to Paul. May it be so, for His name's sake!

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