

LUKE + ACTS

A MESSAGE OF RESCUE



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Luke+Acts: A Message of Rescue

Welcome to *Luke+Acts: A Message of Rescue*. This book is an action-packed account of the life of Jesus and his diverse band of followers, taken directly from two books of the Bible, the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

What is a Gospel?

The word 'gospel' literally means 'good news' and refers to the overall Christian message of the Bible – God's saving acts for us through Jesus' teachings, his death and resurrection and the coming of the kingdom of God.

Early in the history of Christianity, the word 'gospel' came to be used to refer to the books of the New Testament that tell the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection – the books in which this message of good news is told. The four books accepted by most Christians as Gospels are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Each of these Gospels offers a different account and understanding of Jesus and his divine role. They were written by different people and for different audiences – but they are one story of good news.

Luke and Acts

The Gospel according to Luke and the book of Acts are traditionally said to have been written by a doctor called Luke who lived in the Greek city of Antioch, in modern-day Turkey. Luke makes it clear at the beginning of his Gospel that he wasn't a direct witness of Jesus' life but did extensive research to ensure his account was accurate. He was a follower of the apostle Paul and is likely to have been an eyewitness to at least some of the events described in the book of Acts. However, in both books, Luke is keen not just to describe what happened but also to explain why it matters.

In traditional Christian art, each of the Gospel writers is represented by a symbol. This symbolism started appearing around 100 years after Jesus' death, but is commonly associated with St Jerome, a translator of the Bible, in the

fourth century, and was expanded by a monk, Rabanus Maurus, around AD 800.

Luke is represented by an ox or bull, a symbol of both strength and sacrifice (because these animals were often used in ritual sacrifice). His Gospel is focused on what happened to Jesus and why, with an emphasis on Jesus' strength and sacrifice on the cross, which forms a central part of God's rescue plan for creation.



It's also suggested that each symbol has a further meaning – that it reflects a quality or virtue that Christians should show in the way they live. In the case of the ox or bull, it's believed that this signifies the importance of our own strength and the call to sacrifice ourselves by following Jesus.

A message of rescue

The core part of Luke's account in his Gospel and the book of Acts is his exploration of the theme of salvation, of how God will rescue us. Luke explores this by looking at how God has acted to save us in the past (by referencing the Old Testament), how he acted in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and how he will continue to act in the future.

Throughout the following pages, you will find ten reflections based on this theme of God's rescue of us, framed by our human journey in the Bible of creation, fall and salvation.

We hope that this book – the story of Jesus' birth, life and death and God's mission of rescue that we're all invited to join – starts you on a deeper journey with the Bible.

Jesus is Named

²¹ A week later, when the time came for the baby to be circumcised, he was named Jesus, the name which the angel had given him before he had been conceived.

Jesus is Presented in the Temple

²² The time came for Joseph and Mary to perform the ceremony of purification, as the Law of Moses commanded. So they took the child to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, ²³ as it is written in the law of the Lord: "Every firstborn male is to be dedicated to the Lord." ²⁴ They also went to offer a sacrifice of a pair of doves or two young pigeons, as required by the law of the Lord.

²⁵ At that time there was a man named Simeon living in Jerusalem. He was a good, God-fearing man and was waiting for Israel to be saved. The Holy Spirit was with him ²⁶ and had assured him that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's promised Messiah.

²⁷ Led by the Spirit, Simeon went into the Temple. When the parents brought the child Jesus into the Temple to do for him what the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took the child in his arms and gave thanks to God:

²⁹ "Now, Lord, you have kept your promise,
and you may let your servant go in peace.

³⁰ With my own eyes I have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared
in the presence of all peoples:

³² A light to reveal your will to the Gentiles
and bring glory to your people Israel."

³³ The child's father and mother were amazed at the things Simeon said about him. ³⁴ Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother, "This child is chosen by God for the destruction and the salvation of many in Israel. He will be a sign from God which many people will speak against ³⁵ and so reveal their secret thoughts. And sorrow, like a sharp sword, will break your own heart."

³⁶⁻³⁷ There was a very old prophet, a widow named Anna, daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher. She had been married for only seven years and was now 84 years old. She never left the Temple; day and night she worshipped God, fasting and praying. ³⁸ That very same hour she arrived and gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were waiting for God to set Jerusalem free.

The Return to Nazareth

³⁹When Joseph and Mary had finished doing all that was required by the law of the Lord, they returned to their home town of Nazareth in Galilee. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong; he was full of wisdom, and God's blessings were upon him.

The Boy Jesus in the Temple

⁴¹Every year the parents of Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. ⁴²When Jesus was twelve years old, they went to the festival as usual. ⁴³When the festival was over, they started back home, but the boy Jesus stayed in Jerusalem. His parents did not know this; ⁴⁴they thought that he was with the group, so they travelled a whole day and then started looking for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵They did not find him, so they went back to Jerusalem looking for him. ⁴⁶On the third day they found him in the Temple, sitting with the Jewish teachers, listening to them and asking questions. ⁴⁷All who heard him were amazed at his intelligent answers. ⁴⁸His parents were astonished when they saw him, and his mother said to him, "My son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been terribly worried trying to find you."

⁴⁹He answered them, "Why did you have to look for me? Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰But they did not understand his answer.

⁵¹So Jesus went back with them to Nazareth, where he was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵²Jesus grew both in body and in wisdom, gaining favour with God and people.

He answered them, “Why did you have to look for me? Didn’t you know that I had to be in my Father’s house?” But they did not understand his answer.

Luke 2.49–50



Reflect

Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna all recognise the beginning of something special with the arrival of Jesus, but sometimes in life we can become so focused on little things that we forget the big things. Twelve years after Simeon's incredible prophecy that, through Jesus, God had kept his promise to save all people (page 10), Jesus' parents seem to have slipped into the routine of looking after him like any other child.

But even as a young boy Jesus understands who he is and his relationship with God. He is surprised that his parents wonder where he would be, because for him it's obvious – he's exactly where he should be. It's important that these are the first recorded words of Jesus in Luke's Gospel; it's his opening statement – I know who I am, and I know why I'm here.

We don't always have that same certainty that Jesus had. We get bogged down by the day-to-day of life and we can start to lose focus, producing an uncertainty that can make life harder to deal with – an uncertainty that could even see us drift down the wrong path. In Jesus, we can find some sense of the path we should be on and start to see the signs of God's activity in our lives – where we're from, and who we really are. That belonging can bring a peace greater than anything else.

Pray

Lord, my creator,
cut through the noise of the day-to-day
and keep me focused on the important things:
that you made me
and that you love me.

Guide me on the right path:
a path of certainty,
a path of love,
a path of peace.
Amen

Act

In the noise of life, can you find five minutes of quiet every day to listen? Doing activities like gardening, reading, or exercise might offer you a peaceful place to shut out the noise around you and listen. What do you feel? What do you hear?

- ¹⁹ I will perform miracles in the sky above
and wonders on the earth below.
There will be blood, fire, and thick smoke;
²⁰ the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will turn red as blood,
before the great and glorious Day of the Lord comes.
²¹ And then, whoever calls out to the
Lord for help will be saved.'

²²“Listen to these words, fellow-Israelites! Jesus of Nazareth was a man whose divine authority was clearly proven to you by all the miracles and wonders which God performed through him. You yourselves know this, for it happened here among you. ²³In accordance with his own plan God had already decided that Jesus would be handed over to you; and you killed him by letting sinful men crucify him. ²⁴But God raised him from death, setting him free from its power, because it was impossible that death should hold him prisoner.

²⁵For David said about him:

- ‘I saw the Lord before me at all times;
he is near me, and I will not be troubled.
²⁶ And so I am filled with gladness,
and my words are full of joy.
And I, mortal though I am,
will rest assured in hope,
²⁷ because you will not abandon me in the world of the dead;
you will not allow your faithful servant to rot in the grave.
²⁸ You have shown me the paths that lead to life,
and your presence will fill me with joy.’

²⁹“My fellow-Israelites, I must speak to you plainly about our famous ancestor King David. He died and was buried, and his grave is here with us to this very day. ³⁰He was a prophet, and he knew what God had promised him: God had made a vow that he would make one of David's descendants a king, just as David was. ³¹David saw what God was going to do in the future, and so he spoke about the resurrection of the Messiah when he said:

‘He was not abandoned in the world of the dead;
his body did not rot in the grave.’

³²God has raised this very Jesus from death, and we are all witnesses to this fact. ³³He has been raised to the right-hand side of God, his Father, and has received from him the Holy Spirit, as he had promised.

What you now see and hear is his gift that he has poured out on us.

³⁴ For it was not David who went up into heaven; rather he said:

‘The Lord said to my Lord:

Sit here at my right

³⁵ until I put your enemies as a footstool under your feet.’

³⁶ “All the people of Israel, then, are to know for sure that this Jesus, whom you crucified, is the one that God has made Lord and Messiah!”

³⁷ When the people heard this, they were deeply troubled and said to Peter and the other apostles, “What shall we do, brothers?”

³⁸ Peter said to them, “Each one of you must turn away from your sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven; and you will receive God’s gift, the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For God’s promise was made to you and your children, and to all who are far away — all whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

⁴⁰ Peter made his appeal to them and with many other words he urged them, saying, “Save yourselves from the punishment coming on this wicked people!” ⁴¹ Many of them believed his message and were baptized, and about 3,000 people were added to the group that day.

⁴² They spent their time in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship, and sharing in the fellowship meals and the prayers.

Life among the Believers

⁴³ Many miracles and wonders were being done through the apostles, and everyone was filled with awe. ⁴⁴ All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. ⁴⁵ They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each one needed.

⁴⁶ Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.



Peter said to them, “Each one of you must turn away from your sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven; and you will receive God’s gift, the Holy Spirit.”

Acts 2.38

Reflect

Peter seems like a new man. Not long ago, when questioned after Jesus had been arrested, he'd completely denied that he even knew him. He'd witnessed Jesus being executed and, like many who had followed Jesus, faced the fear and uncertainty that had brought. Then he met the resurrected Jesus and, through the Holy Spirit, that simple fisherman was transformed into a bold preacher to the gathered crowd. He went on an incredible, unexpected journey, and his experience of the Holy Spirit renewed and inspired him – the old Peter, the fisherman, the denier, became the new Peter, the first Christian.

The power of this renewal had been promised by Jesus before he was taken up to heaven, but even then it was hard to know what to expect. Peter wants all his listeners to know that the gift of the Holy Spirit, in whichever unexpected ways it renews and empowers their lives, is freely available to all.

Are you open to the unexpected ways that the Holy Spirit might empower, transform, or guide your life?

Pray

Holy Spirit, the renewer of hearts,
transform the old me into the new me.
Open my eyes to the unexpected ways you act in my life,
and give me strength and determination
to face the challenges ahead.
Amen

Act

Is there a part of your life you think is useless, or something that makes you feel hopeless? Can you imagine how it might feel if those things were transformed for the better? Make space for the Holy Spirit to act unexpectedly in your life, to turn those things around – useless to useful, hopeless to hopeful.

Glossary

Abraham

Abraham is one of the earliest and most important heroes of the Jewish people. References to Abraham in Luke and Acts are often used to emphasise the continuous growth of God's promise to humanity.

Apostle

A title given to the close followers of Jesus during his life, carrying on his teachings after his death and resurrection. Apostle means 'sent out' in Greek, the language of the New Testament.

Baptise, Baptist

Baptism describes the act of being put in or covered in water as a symbolic ritual for the beginning of a new life with Jesus.

Covenant

An agreement or promise between God and his people.

Gentile

A term to describe anyone who is not originally or culturally Jewish.

Good News

A term to sum up the message of God's activity to rescue humanity, specifically how we are saved through Jesus' death and resurrection, restoring our relationship with God.

Hades

A Greek word used to describe the place or state of human souls upon death. Although often thought of as the same as Hell, Hades actually has two separate and unconnected parts – paradise and hell.

Israel

Originally the name given by God to Jacob, an early leader of the Jewish religion, the word later became used to describe the land promised by God to the Jewish people. In Luke and Acts, Israel is often used to describe the Jewish people as a whole.

Law

The teachings which form the rules of the Jewish religion, principally derived from the first five books of the Jewish Scriptures, the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). The Torah also forms the basis of the Old Testament.

Messiah

A familiar term in the Jewish religion, it translates as 'anointed one' and is used to describe an individual who will come to lead and save the Jewish people. Some Jews believed that Jesus was the Messiah, and they eventually became the first Christians.

More about the Bible

The events you've just read about took place around 2,000 years ago, and are recorded in two of the books from the Bible, the Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles.

The Bible is made up of many books, each with their own style, focus and purpose. Some books are so brief that they're almost like short stories. Some are copies of letters sent to churches and followers of Jesus shortly after his death and resurrection. Others cover events across hundreds of years or bring together proverbs, songs and sayings.

To this day the Bible remains the world's bestselling book. If you don't have a Bible and would like to explore it further, they are available in most bookshops and libraries. If you're interested in buying one, you can get one online at biblesociety.org.uk/shop. Alternatively you can read the Bible online for free by visiting biblesociety.org.uk/explore.

If you are a prisoner, or a migrant or refugee, Bible Society can help you access a copy of the Bible; just speak to one of your chaplains.

When you're reading the Bible, it can be helpful to do the following things:

- **Pray:** Christians believe that God inspired the Bible; praying when you are reading it helps to tune us into what God might be trying to say to us through its message.
- **Be specific:** Because the Bible is a collection of books, we don't need to read it from start to finish. Try starting with a letter (or epistle) like Galatians or Ephesians, or reading the grand stories from Genesis or the songs of the Psalms.
- **Read with others:** Find a Christian to ask questions or share your insights with; attending a church group or service will help you hear the Bible again and again.
- **Respond:** If there's something that has struck you or inspired you, respond to it in your own life. The Bible challenges us in many ways to be better, to welcome and love others, and to help restore creation. Responding to

these challenges can help bring the Bible to life for you and for others and have a profound impact on the world around you.

One way to get into the Bible more is to take part in The Bible Course, an 8-session accessible and interactive small-group course that's designed to enhance and inform your study of the Bible, whether you're new to it or wanting to explore it deeper. More details can be found by visiting biblesociety.org.uk/explore-the-bible/the-bible-course. Alternatively speak to your chaplain, priest or minister.