

## **Dr. Robert A. Peterson, The Theology of Luke-Acts, Session 7, Joel Green, Purpose Theology.**

This is Dr. Robert A. Peterson in his teaching on the Theology of Luke-Acts. This is session 7, Joel Green, Purpose Theology.

We continue our studies of Lukan theology, and let us seek the Lord.

Father, we bow before you, coming to you into your presence through your Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and ask for your help. Work in us and our families, we pray, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Joel Green, formerly professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, is now professor of exegetical theology or something like that, exegesis and theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in California. He did a marvelous new international commentary on the New Testament Gospel of Luke in 1997, and it is solid in its exegesis, but most noteworthy for his use of sociology and rhetoric in helping us understand Luke's message, the message of the Gospel of Luke. Now, not Acts, but the Gospel of Luke.

“The social setting of Luke is something that he speaks to in a very helpful way. With the reading of the story of Jesus' birth and childhood, we gain entry into the social world of, as a matter of fact, Luke-Acts, its understanding of reality, including the role of the supernatural, its primary institutions, and their function, its social dynamics, and so on.

We can alert ourselves to some of the motifs that are prominent in the world of Luke's birth narrative. From the opening verse, it's apparent that Luke is concerned with the balance of power. The narrative opening in the days of King Herod of Judea, Luke 1-5, is more than a vague chronological marker but locates these events in a particular period of political tension.

Herod came to power despite strong anti-Idumean feelings, that's his background, Idumea, and resistance from the Jewish elders in Jerusalem. He was regarded as kind of a half-Jew and not respected in that way. This, together with problematic economic and cultural affairs associated with his reign, must be factored into any reading of the language, the days of King Herod.

The same can be said of the census, mentioned repeatedly in Luke 2:7. The prosperity and peace for which the Roman Empire is now known was produced through initial conquest and plunder and maintained through subsequent taxation of conquered peoples. The explicit naming of Caesar Augustus in 2:1 is also of interest

and refers to Octavian, recognized in antiquity as, quote, the divine savior, small s, who has brought peace to the world.”

“That in this very context, Jesus is presented as savior, Lord, the one through whom peace comes to the world, can hardly be accidental. Luke 2:11 and 2:14. Moreover, the angel who visits Zechariah and Mary, Gabriel, is known elsewhere as one who destroys the wicked, especially in the non-biblical writing of 1 Enoch 9 and 10 and 54 and verse 6. Mary's son, she is told, will have an everlasting kingdom, the throne of David.

The song of Mary portrays God's mighty acts of salvation as socio-political reversal, with the powerful brought down from their thrones and the lowly uplifted. The song of Zechariah employs images of exodus while prophesying how, quote, we would be saved from our enemies.” 171.

Simeon and Anna, in their respective role, hopes for the consolation of Israel and redemption of Jerusalem, must also have in mind the cessation of foreign occupancy and subjection, the renewal of Israel as a nation under Yahweh and not under Caesar. Recalling that eschatological anticipation in its myriad forms, focused preeminently on the coming of God to rule in peace and justice, highlights how Luke 1:5 to 2:52 must also be read against a socio-political backdrop. This is true inasmuch as the anticipated coming of God would bring an end to political dominance and social oppression.

Moreover, the eschatological visitation of God noted in Luke 1:68 and 2:38 signify the appearance of divine help and deliverance. Finally, Mary, Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna each give expression to an expectation of God's end-time deliverance. In these ways, the birth narrative is potent with eschatological anticipation and anticipation with clear ramifications for the cessation of Israel's subjugation to its Herodian and Roman overlords.

The social setting to which we are introduced in Luke 1:5 to 2:52 is one in which issues of social status and social stratification are paramount. This is not to say that Luke is especially concerned with economic class, for example, as a function of one's relative income or standard of living or as related to one's relationship to the themes of production, the means of production, as in Marxism. Such matters of post-industrial society have little meaning in Greco-Roman antiquity.

Rather, Luke's social world was defined around power and privilege and is measured by a complex of phenomena: religious purity, family heritage, land ownership for non-priests, vocation, ethnicity, gender, education, and age. All these things factor in along a continuum of power and privilege. The ruler holds the most power and has the most privilege.

Under him, the governing class participates, not to the same degree, but significantly in power and privilege. And from there, it goes down to priests who hold significant power and privilege over the people. Likewise, merchants can get rich.

Peasants are a large group and are basically hand-to-mouth dependent on the reigns in Palestine for their survival. Artisans are not much better than peasants, those who make their living that way. But this whole sociology of power and privilege is remarkable for its bottom rungs.

Those at the very bottom of the list are the unclean, lepers for example, the degraded. Think of the poor man, Lazarus, outside the rich man's home. I know it's a parable, but Jesus is referring to life circumstances that exist.

Begging to eat something that fell, some bread that fell from the rich man's table. Probably a reference to pieces of bread used as napkins and then thrown on the ground for the dogs. The starving, sick Lazarus would love to have some of that but was not even thought of.

So, ruler, governing class, below that, are the priests and merchants, artisans in there, and peasants covering a big swath in the middle of this power and privilege chart, if you will. The bottom, the very bottom, unclean and degraded, and the very bottom are the expendables whom nobody cares about. If they die, that's just. We're better off without them. They're expendable.

Now, the remarkable thing is that Jesus ministers to people all along this continuum of power and prestige as we will see. I want to share Joel Greene's teaching concerning the purpose and theology of the Gospel of Luke. In 1995, he wrote a book, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, and here he builds on that.

Luke's theology, of course, is narrative theology. He tells the story of Jesus. He has a concern for history, and his history is accurate, but his history is theological history, designed to make a point, designed to present a person and his interest and his mission and his goals and purpose in life.

The narrative unity of Gospel of Luke and Acts highlights the centrality of God's purpose to bring salvation to all, and here we have again the kind of things we just talked about before with the sociology. The rich, the poor, those of different races, of different ethnicities, of different social strata in life. In the conflicted world of the first-century Mediterranean, not least within the larger Jewish world, it is not difficult to see how this understanding of God's purpose and its embodiment in the Christian movement would have been the source of controversy and uncertainty.

Against this backdrop, we see that the purpose of Luke-Acts would have been to strengthen the Christian movement in the face of opposition by ensuring them in

their interpretation and experience of the redemptive purpose and faithfulness of God, number one, and two, by calling them to continued faithfulness and witness in God's salvific project, much like the teaching of Darrell Bock. The purpose of Luke-Acts then would be primarily ecclesiological, concerned with the practices that define and the criteria for legitimating the community of God's people and centered on the invitation to participate in God's project. Our understanding of the aim of Luke-Acts must account for its primary theological emphases.

Recent scholarship has repeatedly identified salvation as the primary theme of Luke-Acts. Darrell Bock agrees. Howard Marshall agrees.

This theme of salvation being understood as that which unifies other textual elements within the narrative. In order to make sense of the theme of salvation and to show the degree to which it is integrated into the overall purpose of strengthening the church, we now outline some of Luke's key theological concerns. To a degree not fully appreciated in many earlier studies of the third gospel, Luke's narrative is theological in substance and focus.

That is, it is centered on God himself. This is not to say that God often appears as a character within the narrative. Manifestly, this is not the case.

Rather, it is to assert that the design guiding the progression of the narrative, the purpose being served or combated, is God's purpose, God's design. If salvation is the central theme of Luke, then it is not accidental that in one of the earliest references to God in the gospel, Mary addresses him as God my Savior in her Magnificat, Luke 1-47. She praises God, my Savior.

Especially in the central section of the gospel, concerned with the meandering journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus attempts to reconstruct the view of God held by his followers in order that they may recognize God as their Father, whose desire is to embrace them with his gracious beneficence. Luke 1:13. Luke 12:32. Sorry, Luke 11:13. Luke 12:32. Luke 11:13 is a Lord's Prayer.

Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread and forgive us our sins as we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us and lead us not into temptation. If you then, after he tells a little parable, Luke 11:13, if you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him? Luke 12:32.

Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. The divine purpose or perspective sometimes serves directly in the narrative. For example, when God speaks to Jesus at his baptism.

This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased. More typical, though, is the way the divine purpose is made available and interpreted with reference to the scriptures by means of heavenly messengers through a constellation of terms expressive of God's design. For example, purpose.

It is necessary to determine, and so forth. And through instances of divine choreography of events. Behind the realization of the divine plan is the Holy Spirit, the power that puts into effect the will of God.

Luke's emphasis on the divine purpose serves his ecclesiological and hermeneutical interests as the Christian community struggles with its own identity, not least over against those who also read the scriptures, but who refuse faith in Christ. The coherence between God's ancient agenda and the ministry of Jesus becomes crucial.

In fact, Jesus' struggle with the Jewish leadership and with the Jewish institutions is essentially hermeneutical. Who understands God's purpose? Who interprets the scriptures correctly? Or, to put it more starkly, whose interpretation has a divine imprimatur? Whose receives divine legitimation? For Luke, the answer is simple. The advent of Jesus is deeply rooted in the ancient covenant, and his mission is fully congruent with God's intent.

This is shown above all by the scriptural pattern of his life and by the divine vindication pronounced over him in his resurrection and ascension. God may control the agenda of the story according to Luke, but the main character in God's first volume is, of course, Jesus. Compared with characters within the narrative, Luke's own audience is fortunate in its ability from the very beginning to perceive Jesus' identity and role in God's redemptive plan.

Jesus is portrayed as a prophet but as more than a prophet. He's the long-awaited Davidic Messiah, son of God, who fulfills in his career the destiny of a regal prophet, a royal prophet, for whom death, though necessary, is hardly the last word. For Jesus' disciples, the struggle is not so much to discern who Jesus is, but how he can fulfill his role.

Their own views of the world remain conventional throughout most of the gospel. Hence, although almost to the end of the gospel, they lack the capacity to correlate Jesus' exalted status as God's Messiah with the prospect and experience of his heinous suffering. Early on, Jesus is identified as Savior, 2:11. The angel tell the shepherds, behold this day in the city of David, a Savior has been born to you, Christ the Lord.

This is the role he fulfills in numerous ways. Among the most visible are his miracles of healing and the expansive nature of his table fellowship. The third evangelist

highlights both, for whom such practices embody the truth of the in-breaking kingdom of God.

In Jesus' interactions with people at the table and in his ministry of healing, he communicates the presence of divine salvation for those whose position in society at large is generally on the margins. That is, this is good news to the poor, 4, chapter 4, 18 and 19. This is very important where Jesus quotes Isaiah 61, Luke 4:16.

He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.

He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written. The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. And the eyes of all the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Wow. They never heard anybody say that before. False messiahs could say it, but we're not talking about them.

Wow. Such behaviors are matched by Jesus' words. He doesn't just stand up and say he's going to bring good news to the poor.

He does it. And Jesus' teaching occupies major sections within the third gospel, especially in the middle section of the gospel devoted to his journey to Jerusalem. What is often striking about his instruction is its orientation, not to proper behavior simply per se, but toward a reconstructed vision of God and the sort of world order that might reflect this vision of God.

To put it differently, Jesus, as a son of God, is God's representative, whose life is characterized by obedience to God and who interprets for others, if they will only listen, God's nature and plan and the contours of appropriate response to God. For Luke, then, the call to discipleship is fundamentally an invitation for persons to align themselves with Jesus and, thus, with God. This means that for membership among the people of God, the focus is removed from issues of inherited status, and a premium is placed on persons whose behaviors manifest their unmitigated embrace of the gracious God.

Genuine children of Abraham are those who embody in their lives the beneficence of God and who express open-handed mercy to others, especially toward those in need.

Jesus thus calls on people to live as he lives, in contradistinction to the agonistic, competitive form of life marked by conventional notions of honor and status typical of the larger Roman world. Behaviors that grow out of service in the kingdom of God take a different turn.

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, extend hospitality to those who cannot reciprocate, and give without expectation of return. Such practices are only possible for those whose dispositions, convictions, and commitments have been reshaped by transformative encounters with the goodness of God. Within the third gospel, the chief competitor for this focus stems from money, not so much money itself, but the rule of money manifest in the drive for social praise and so in forms of life designed to keep those with power and privilege segregated from those of low status, the least, the lost and the left out.

Green has mentioned some really important ideas here, and I want to do a brief excursion picking up his ideas of power and status and this uh competitive form of life. The name that is most noteworthy today in this whole regard is John Barclay who has transformed our understanding of the grace of God in its first century Greco-Roman context. Basically, there was no grace of God in the Greco-Roman context.

I'm not denying that the people of God understood the grace of God. I am denying that the Greco-Roman perspective on life and worldview had any notion of the grace of God. The whole social structure was a web of relationships involving patrons, those with greater power than prestige than their clients.

Patron-client relationships in a complicated web webbing of life was structured, the whole of Greco-Roman society. Patrons gave not freely. They did give, and they helped others but with great obligation, understood demand, and that is the right word. The client was expected to be faithful to the patron and to pay him back, not especially with a return on investment but in other ways contributing to the patron's glory and honor and wishes and desires and plans and purposes.

For example, in turn, the clients received benefit, but once again, it is not without strings attached. There were strings everywhere. Reciprocal obligations dominated the whole of society, and so when Jesus said things like love your enemies and do good to those who hate you, or if in his parables he said invite the poor to the feast, that is so incredibly counter-cultural we can hardly even express it.

Extend hospitality to those who cannot reciprocate. That is fundamentally heretical if I can use that term within their worldview. Barclay shows there is no such thing as giving without obligation.

Every gift is not a free gift. It is a gift that demands obligation on the part of the receiver, and in turn, the clients can be patrons to other clients, and on it goes in a complicated web of relationships. In the midst of this, Jesus comes and does not only minister to the lowly, but whether it is the high, the middle, or the lowly, he gives freely, and he teaches that he gives the way God gives. He gives the way the one he calls his Father gives, and this is so revolutionary in the Greco-Roman world of the first century that it should be noted and it is just a marvelous thing that whether even the word grace is always used or not, the concept of the grace of God permeates Jesus person and character and ministry.

Oh, I'm not denying that he was holy and just and exhibited other qualities, but if salvation is the major purpose of the gospel of Luke and the propagation of that salvation the major purpose of the book of Acts, God's grace is paramount it is pervasive, and it's not only the message preached outwardly to unsaved people of all social strata and in all situations of life and both genders and so forth, but it is also what should lubricate the relations within the new people of God the new covenant community of God's people. John Barclay's work I don't recommend everything he's written or all of his conclusions I'm simply saying he has sparked great interest in discovering how unique the grace of God in Jesus Christ is in that Roman Greco-Roman world. Jesus' disciples are not entirely successful in returning to Darrell Boxk's excuse me returning to Joel Greene's erudite and evangelical commentary on the gospel of Luke.

Jesus' disciples are not entirely successful in embodying faithfulness of this nature and magnitude. How could they be? This makes all the more striking Luke's witness of others near nobodies in the narrative who manifest unexpected insight into God's purpose and respond to the message of Jesus in exemplary ways. What he's saying is the disciples don't always get the message, and so Luke brings in others Greene calls them nobodies who do a better job than the disciples at certain points in the narrative.

A sinful woman from the city chapter 7 verses 36 to 50 a passage I will deal with in my own lecture on the church which should be in our next session. A wealthy toll collector tax collector Zacchaeus. A crucified criminal the repentant thief to mention three.

These people are nobodies. The attack these Pharisees could not believe Jesus was letting this immoral, useless in his mind woman touch him. Oh, it's disgusting.

If he were a prophet, he would not let that happen, and Zacchaeus was despised. He was not only a tax collector but also a chief tax collector. We don't know exactly what that means, but he was probably worse than the others and was so rich that when the message of the kingdom struck his heart, he gave away more than the law



required out of a spirit of gratefulness and a spirit of grace to God and to those whom he had cheated in the past and the dying criminal on the cross.

So, Luke has a sense of humor, we might say certainly an ironic sense in showing unexpectedly, as the disciples struggle, sometimes these nobodies do a better job than they do at understanding God's purposes and ways. For their part, the disciples find that following Jesus is mostly about being with Jesus, learning from him, and becoming socialized anew according to the new world order his ministry serves, propagates, and anticipates, all in preparation for their role as witnesses in the acts of the apostles. If disciples struggle to embrace faithfulness as this is defined and modeled by Jesus, others contend for the opposite.

Those hostile to Jesus calculate the divine agenda along quite different lines and see his ministry as a threat to their own positions of leadership and the institutions that perpetuate the present order of things. In short, they see Jesus as opposing God himself. God as they understand God to be, of course, and thus someone to be resisted at all costs.

The devil himself opposes a divine aim, and from the Lucan perspective, the devil's aims are served both by diabolical forces that oppress people and by others, including the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, who oppose God. The river of hostility grows wider and wider, finally overflowing its banks at Jesus' passion resulting in his final rejection, crucifixion, and death. The motif of hostility pushes Luke's narrative along with heightened suspense but is also employed in order to show in what iconic ways the purpose of God might come to realization, turning opposition against its own ends so as to fulfill the divine plan.

Throughout the Lukan narrative, it focuses attention on a pervasive coordinating theme as Bach has shown us as Howard Marshall would if we had time to look at his uh Luke historian and theologian and as Bach emphasizes now the pervasive coordinating theme salvation. Salvation is neither merely a theory nor merely a future but embraces life in the present, restoring the integrity of human life, revitalizing human communities, setting the cosmos in order, and commissioning the community of God's people to put God's grace into practice among themselves and toward ever-widening circles of others. The third evangelist knows nothing of such dichotomies as those sometimes drawn between social and spiritual or individual and communal.

Salvation embraces the totality of embodied life, including its social, economic, and political concerns. For Luke, the God of Israel is the great benefactor whose redemptive purpose is manifest in the career of Jesus, whose message is that this benefaction enables and inspires new ways of living in the world. In our next lecture I will share some of my own studies concerning the people of God, the church in Luke's gospel.

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