THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

The King Who Came Looking

Luke, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King Who Came Looking: The Gospel of Luke, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the other books in this series, you know the saying I keep coming back to: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." I'm not going to apologize for it this time. It has become a tradition.

Here's why it fits Luke especially well. Luke was not someone who assumed he knew it all. He was a careful researcher. Before he wrote a single story, he tracked down eyewitnesses, checked what had been handed down, and then put it in order. He tells you that in his very first sentence. Luke is the Gospel for anyone who has ever said, "Prove it."

Luke was probably a doctor. Paul calls him "the doctor" in one of his letters, and Luke traveled with Paul for years. He also wrote a second volume, the book of Acts, which picks up right where his Gospel leaves off. Together, Luke and Acts make up more than a quarter of the New Testament. That's a lot of pages from one careful writer.

Luke was also most likely not Jewish. If so, he may be the only non-Jewish author in the whole Bible. Maybe that's why his Gospel keeps noticing people who stood outside the circle: Samaritans, tax collectors, lepers, widows, shepherds, a criminal on a cross, a short man up a tree. More than any other Gospel, Luke shows Jesus with women, with the poor, and with people everyone else had written off.

Some of the most famous stories Jesus ever told are found only in Luke: the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Without Luke, we wouldn't have the shepherds at the manger, Zacchaeus, or the two travelers on the road to Emmaus. Luke also shows Jesus praying again and again, and he keeps pointing to the Holy Spirit at work.

So here's the challenge. Luke wrote so that his reader would "know the certainty" of what he had been taught. Not just feel it. Know it. Bring your questions. Bring your doubts. Luke can handle them. But be ready: the Jesus you'll meet in this book goes looking for people who are lost. That might include you.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all 24 chapters of Luke, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of Luke. Each one tells what happened, adds background about the world Jesus lived in (Roman rule, Herod's family, Samaritans, Pharisees and tax collectors, Passover, crucifixion), and points out what Luke wants you to notice.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and sometimes a Try This challenge.

One more thing: this book is a guide, not a replacement. Keep a Bible open next to it and read each chapter of Luke for yourself.

Luke wanted his reader to check the facts. So do I. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on Matthew and Mark, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the whole Gospel of Luke, all 24 chapters, in order. I have worked to stay faithful to the text: no invented events, no rewritten dialogue that changes the meaning. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV); elsewhere I paraphrase and explain. Historical background is included where it helps the story make sense, and I've tried to stay with what's well established rather than speculation.

Luke has features that make it especially good for this age group. It begins with a historian's promise to check the facts, which invites honest questions. And it is full of people on the outside: the poor, women, foreigners, the sick, and the notoriously sinful. Teenagers know what it feels like to be on the outside. I've leaned into the parables found only in Luke, Luke's emphasis on prayer and the Holy Spirit, and Jesus' care for those everyone else overlooked. The hard parts are here too, including the crucifixion, told truthfully but without graphic excess.

Where the NIV notes that some early manuscripts lack a passage (for example, the angel and the sweat like drops of blood in Luke 22:43–44), I've said so briefly and respectfully, so that students aren't surprised when they see those notes in their own Bibles.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will discover what Zacchaeus discovered: that Jesus came looking for him, by name, and that being found by Jesus changes everything.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

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CHAPTER 1

Check the Facts

Luke 1

Most books about Jesus start with Jesus. Luke starts with a research report.

In his first four verses, Luke tells you exactly what he did and why. Many people had already written accounts of Jesus' life. Those accounts were based on what had been handed down by people who were there from the beginning, eyewitnesses. Luke says he had "carefully investigated everything from the beginning," and then decided to write it all down in order for a man named Theophilus. His goal? So that Theophilus could "know the certainty" of what he had been taught.

That's not how people write fairy tales. "Once upon a time" doesn't come with sources. Luke writes like a historian, and he anchors his story in real time: "In the time of Herod king of Judea." He names rulers, priests, places, and dates. He's basically saying, Go check.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Was Luke?**
>
> Luke is never named in his own Gospel, but early Christian writers agree that he wrote it. Paul mentions him three times in his letters and calls him a doctor. Luke traveled with Paul for years; in the book of Acts, which Luke also wrote, the story suddenly switches to "we" when Luke joins the trip. Most scholars think he was a non-Jewish believer, mainly because Paul lists him separately from his Jewish co-workers in Colossians 4. If so, he may be the

> only Gentile author in the Bible, though not everyone agrees. Theophilus, the man he wrote to, may have been a Roman official or a wealthy new believer. His name means “friend of God.”

The story itself opens in the temple in Jerusalem. An elderly priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, are good people who have lived faithfully for decades. But they have no children, and they’re too old to have any. In that culture, being childless often brought shame, as if God must be displeased with you. Luke makes it clear that wasn’t the case. They were “righteous in the sight of God.”

Zechariah gets the honor of a lifetime: he’s chosen by lot to go into the temple and burn incense. Some priests never got that chance. While he’s inside, an angel appears beside the altar. Zechariah is terrified. The angel, Gabriel, tells him that his prayer has been heard. Elizabeth will have a son, and they are to name him John. This boy will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born, and he will prepare people for the Lord.

Zechariah’s response is very human: How can I be sure of this? I’m an old man. Gabriel answers that he stands in God’s presence, and because Zechariah didn’t believe, he won’t be able to speak until it happens. Zechariah walks out of the temple unable to say a word to the waiting crowd.

Six months later, Gabriel makes another visit. This time it’s not to a priest in the temple. It’s to a young woman in Nazareth, a small village nobody thought much of. Her name is Mary. She is engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. She is probably a teenager.

Gabriel tells her she will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and she is to name Him Jesus. “He will be great and will be called

the Son of the Most High." He will reign on David's throne forever. Mary asks how this can happen, since she is a virgin. Notice that her question is different from Zechariah's. He asked for proof. She asks how. Gabriel explains that the Holy Spirit will come on her, and the child will be called the Son of God. Then he tells her that Elizabeth, the relative everyone said couldn't have children, is six months pregnant. "For no word from God will ever fail."

Mary's answer is one of the bravest sentences in the Bible: "I am the Lord's servant." She knew what this would cost. An unmarried pregnant girl in a small village would face gossip, suspicion, maybe worse. She said yes anyway.

Mary hurries to visit Elizabeth. When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaps, and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. She calls Mary blessed for believing what the Lord told her. Then Mary breaks into a song, sometimes called the Magnificat from its first word in Latin. It's not a soft lullaby. It's a revolution. God has scattered the proud, brought down rulers, lifted up the humble, filled the hungry, and sent the rich away empty. Before Jesus is even born, Luke sets the theme: God turns the world upside down.

When Elizabeth's baby is born, the neighbors assume he'll be named after his father. Elizabeth says no, his name is John. The relatives turn to Zechariah, who writes on a tablet, "His name is John." Immediately he can speak again, and the first thing he does is praise God. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he prophesies that God is keeping His ancient promises, and that his little son will go ahead of the Lord to prepare His way.

Count how many times the Holy Spirit shows up in this one chapter: John filled with the Spirit, the Spirit coming on Mary, Elizabeth

filled with the Spirit, Zechariah filled with the Spirit. Luke wants you to notice. The Spirit is moving, and something huge is about to happen.

KEY VERSE

For no word from God will ever fail.

Luke 1:37 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Luke tells us up front that he investigated the facts. Does it matter to you that the Gospels are based on eyewitness accounts? Why or why not?
2. Zechariah and Mary both asked Gabriel a question. Why do you think one was disciplined and the other wasn't?
3. Mary said yes to God, knowing it would cost her. What's something God might be asking you to say yes to?

TRY THIS *Read Luke 1:1–4 and write down three questions you'd want to ask an eyewitness of Jesus. Keep them handy as you read this book.*

CHAPTER 2

No Room, Wrong Guests

Luke 2

Luke opens this chapter with the most powerful man in the world. Caesar Augustus, emperor of Rome, orders a census of the entire Roman world. He wants to count everyone, mostly so he can tax them. Augustus called himself a bringer of peace. Some of his subjects even called him a savior.

Because of the emperor's paperwork, Joseph has to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, his family's hometown, with Mary, who is very pregnant. It's a trip of about ninety miles, mostly on foot. While they are there, the baby comes. Mary wraps Him in cloths and lays Him in a manger, a feeding trough for animals, "because there was no guest room available for them."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **No Room at the Inn?**
>
> Many people picture a heartless innkeeper slamming the door. But the Greek word Luke uses usually means a guest room in a private home, not a hotel. Most village homes had a family living space and a lower area where animals were brought in at night. If the guest room was already full of relatives, Mary and Joseph may have ended up in the part of the house where the animals stayed. Either way, the point is the same: the King of the universe was born in the most ordinary, humble place imaginable.

Now here's the twist. The emperor in Rome doesn't hear about this birth. Neither do the religious leaders in Jerusalem. The first people

to get the announcement are shepherds working the night shift in the fields.

Shepherds were not respected. Their work kept them outdoors and often away from religious life, and some people considered them unreliable. In some settings, their testimony wasn't even trusted in court. And they're the ones God chooses as the first witnesses.

An angel appears, the glory of the Lord shines around them, and they are terrified. The angel says not to be afraid. He brings good news of great joy for all the people: a Savior has been born, "he is the Messiah, the Lord." Then the sky fills with angels praising God and announcing peace on earth.

Do you see what Luke is doing? Caesar claimed to be a savior who brought peace. The angels say the real Savior has just been born, and He's lying in a feeding trough in Bethlehem.

The shepherds hurry to find the baby, exactly as the angel said. Then they tell everyone. "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Luke may have heard some of these details from Mary herself. Who else would know what she was thinking?

Forty days after the birth, Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem, as the law required. They offer a pair of doves or pigeons. That detail tells you something: the law allowed families who couldn't afford a lamb to bring birds instead. Jesus grew up in a poor family.

In the temple, two elderly people are waiting. Simeon, a righteous man, had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he saw the Lord's Messiah. He takes the baby in his arms and praises God. Now he can die in peace, because he has seen God's

salvation, a light for the Gentiles and glory for Israel. Then he tells Mary something hard: this child will cause many to fall and rise, and a sword will pierce her own soul too.

Then there's Anna, a prophet who had been a widow for decades and was now about eighty-four. She never left the temple, worshiping night and day with fasting and prayer. She comes up at that moment, thanks God, and talks about the child to everyone waiting for redemption. An old man and an old widow. Luke loves to pair a man and a woman, and he loves to show God honoring people others overlooked.

The chapter ends with the only story in the Bible about Jesus as a boy. When He's twelve, His family goes to Jerusalem for Passover. On the way home, Mary and Joseph realize He isn't with their group. Large families traveled together in caravans, so it took them a full day to notice. They rush back and spend three days searching. Any parent can imagine the panic.

They find Him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions. Everyone is amazed at His understanding. Mary says what any mom would say: Why have You treated us like this? We've been looking everywhere for You! Jesus answers, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" They don't understand. But He goes home with them and obeys them.

Here's something to notice: at twelve, Jesus already knew who His real Father was. And He still went home and lived in obedience to His earthly parents. "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." The Son of God went through puberty. He grew up. He learned. He knows what your age feels like.

KEY VERSE

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

Luke 2:11 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. God announced the birth of Jesus to shepherds instead of to kings or priests. What does that tell you about the kind of people Jesus came for?
2. Mary "pondered" everything in her heart. What would it look like for you to slow down and think about what God is doing in your life?
3. Jesus grew "in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." Which of those four areas do you most want to grow in this year?

CHAPTER 3

Ax at the Roots

Luke 3

Luke sets the scene like a historian again. He lists the emperor, Tiberius Caesar, in his fifteenth year; the governor, Pontius Pilate; three rulers of nearby regions, including Herod; and the high priests, Annas and Caiaphas. That's roughly AD 28 or 29. Then, after all those powerful names, Luke says the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Not to the emperor. Not to the high priest. To a man in the desert.

John preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Luke quotes Isaiah: every valley will be filled in, every mountain made low, the crooked roads made straight, "And all people will see God's salvation." Only Luke continues the quotation that far. All people. Not just Israel.

John is not a gentle speaker. When crowds come out to be baptized, he calls them a "brood of vipers." He tells them not to rely on their ancestry: don't say, We have Abraham as our father. God could raise up children for Abraham from these stones. "The ax is already at the root of the trees." Any tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down.

So the crowds ask a fair question: "What should we do then?" And John's answers are surprisingly practical. If you have two shirts,

share with someone who has none. Same with food. Tax collectors ask what they should do: don't collect any more than you're required to. Soldiers ask too: don't extort money, don't accuse people falsely, and be content with your pay.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Tax Collectors and Soldiers**

Tax collectors in Judea worked for Rome, or for rulers backed by Rome. They bid for the right to collect taxes and could keep whatever extra they squeezed out of people. Most people saw them as traitors and thieves. The soldiers who came to John were probably not Roman legionaries but local troops serving Herod or guarding the tax collectors. Both groups were hated, and both came to John asking how to change. Luke wants you to notice that.

Notice what John didn't say. He didn't tell the tax collectors to quit or the soldiers to desert. He told them to be honest and fair right where they were. Real repentance shows up in how you treat people, how you handle money, and whether you're content with what you have.

People start wondering if John might be the Messiah. He shuts that down fast. Someone more powerful is coming, he says. I'm not even worthy to untie His sandals. "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Later, John's honesty costs him. He confronts Herod for marrying his brother's wife and for other evil things, and Herod locks him in prison.

Then comes the baptism of Jesus. Luke tells it in just two verses, but he includes a detail the others don't: Jesus was praying. "And as he was praying, heaven was opened." Watch for that. In Luke, Jesus prays before almost every major moment in His life. The Holy Spirit descends on Him in bodily form like a dove, and the Father speaks: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Then Luke does something that might feel like a speed bump: he gives a family tree. Matthew has one too, but Matthew starts with Abraham and works forward. Luke starts with Jesus and works backward, past David, past Abraham, all the way to Adam, "the son of God."

Why go all the way back to Adam? Because Luke's point is that Jesus isn't just the Savior of one nation. He's connected to the whole human race. Every person on earth descends from Adam. Jesus came for all of them. That includes the tax collector, the soldier, the Gentile doctor who wrote this book, and you.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Two Family Trees?**
>
> Matthew's and Luke's genealogies differ in the generations between David and Joseph. Christians have suggested several explanations. One is that Luke traces Mary's line while Matthew traces Joseph's. Another is that one list follows legal descent while the other follows biological descent, since ancient families sometimes passed on names and inheritance through adoption or the custom of a brother marrying a widow. Ancient readers didn't see two lists as a contradiction. Each writer had his own purpose.

Jesus was about thirty years old when He began His ministry. That's not young in that culture. He waited. He spent years in a small town working with His hands before anyone heard Him preach. God isn't in a hurry the way we are.

KEY VERSE

And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Luke 3:22 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. John told people that repentance shows up in practical ways like sharing, honesty, and contentment. What would "fruit" look like in your own life right now?
2. The Father said He was pleased with Jesus before Jesus had done any public ministry. What does that suggest about where your worth comes from?
3. Luke traces Jesus' family tree all the way back to Adam. Why does it matter that Jesus is connected to the whole human race?

CHAPTER 4

The Hometown Riot

Luke 4

Full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where He is tempted by the devil for forty days. He eats nothing, and at the end He is hungry. That's when the devil makes his move.

First: You're the Son of God? Tell this stone to become bread. Jesus answers from Deuteronomy: people do not live on bread alone. Second, the devil shows Him all the kingdoms of the world in an instant and offers Him all of it, if Jesus will worship him. Jesus answers: worship the Lord your God and serve Him only. Third, the devil takes Him to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem and dares Him to jump, quoting a psalm that promises angels will catch Him. Jesus answers: do not put the Lord your God to the test.

Every time, Jesus answers with Scripture. Every time, the temptation is the same at the root: prove yourself, take a shortcut, do it your way instead of the Father's way. Luke adds a chilling line at the end. The devil left Him "until an opportune time." He'd be back.

Jesus returns to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit," and word about Him spreads. Then He goes home to Nazareth. On the Sabbath, He stands up in the synagogue to read. The attendant hands Him the scroll of Isaiah, and He finds the place where it says the Spirit of the

Lord is on Him, anointing Him to bring good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, sight for the blind, and release for the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

He rolls up the scroll, hands it back, and sits down. Every eye in the room is on Him. Then He says, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Synagogue**
>
> A synagogue was a local gathering place for prayer, Scripture reading, and teaching. The temple was in Jerusalem, but nearly every town had a synagogue. On the Sabbath, men from the community could be invited to read from the Scriptures and comment on them. Teachers usually sat down to teach, so when Jesus sat down, everyone knew He was about to explain what He'd just read.

This is basically Jesus' mission statement in Luke. Look at the list: the poor, prisoners, the blind, the oppressed. The rest of the book will show Him doing exactly that.

At first the crowd is impressed. Then someone says, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" We know this guy. He grew up down the street. Jesus knows what they're thinking: Do here the miracles we heard You did in Capernaum. He says no prophet is accepted in his hometown.

Then He reminds them of two stories from their own Scriptures. During a famine, there were many widows in Israel, but the prophet Elijah was sent to a widow in Sidon, a foreign town. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha, but the one who was healed was Naaman, a Syrian army commander. Both were outsiders. Both were Gentiles.

That's when the room explodes. The people are furious. They drive Him out of town to the edge of the cliff the town was built on, ready

to throw Him off. “But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.”

Think about that. Jesus’ first sermon in Luke ends with an attempted murder. Why? Because He told His own people that God’s grace was for outsiders too. People will often accept a Jesus who blesses them. They get angry at a Jesus who blesses the people they look down on.

Jesus moves on to Capernaum. There, in the synagogue, a man possessed by a demon screams at Him, and the demon knows exactly who He is: “the Holy One of God.” Jesus orders it to be quiet and come out, and it does. The people are amazed: His words have authority.

He goes to Simon Peter’s house, where Simon’s mother-in-law has a high fever. Luke the doctor notices that detail; the other Gospels just say fever. Jesus bends over her and rebukes the fever, and she gets up and starts serving them. That evening, people bring everyone who is sick, and Jesus lays His hands on each one. Not a mass healing from a stage. Each one.

At daybreak He goes to a solitary place. The crowds find Him and try to keep Him from leaving. He says He must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why He was sent.

KEY VERSE

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

Luke 4:18 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Each of the devil's temptations offered Jesus a shortcut. What shortcuts are you most tempted to take?
2. The people of Nazareth got angry when Jesus talked about God blessing outsiders. Why do you think that made them so mad?
3. Jesus laid His hands on each sick person one at a time. What does that tell you about how He sees individuals?

CHAPTER 5

Into the Deep Water

Luke 5

Jesus is standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, another name for the Sea of Galilee, and the crowd is pressing in so hard He's about to end up in the water. He sees two boats on the shore. The fishermen have gotten out and are washing their nets. He gets into the boat that belongs to Simon and asks him to push out a little, then sits down and teaches the crowd from the boat.

When He's done, He says to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

Simon is a professional fisherman. Jesus is a carpenter's son from an inland village. And Simon has just worked all night without catching anything. You can hear the exhaustion in his reply: Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. "But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

They catch so many fish that the nets begin to break. They signal their partners in the other boat, and both boats fill up so full that they begin to sink.

Simon's reaction is not what you'd expect. He doesn't high-five anyone. He falls at Jesus' knees and says, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" In that moment, Simon realizes who he's dealing with, and he realizes who he is. That's what happens when people

encounter God's holiness up close. They don't feel impressive. They feel exposed.

Jesus doesn't go away. He says, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." Simon, his brother Andrew, and their partners James and John pull their boats up on shore, leave everything, and follow Him. The biggest catch of their careers is sitting right there in the boats, and they walk away from it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Fishing on the Sea of Galilee**
>
> The Sea of Galilee is actually a freshwater lake, about thirteen miles long. Fishing was a major industry. Fishermen often worked at night with large nets, because fish came closer to the surface in the dark and the cooler water. Fishing in deep water in the middle of the day, as Jesus told Simon to do, went against everything a professional knew. In 1986, during a drought, two brothers found the remains of a first-century fishing boat in the mud near the lake. It was about 27 feet long and could hold a dozen or more people.

Then a man covered with leprosy sees Jesus and falls with his face to the ground, begging, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Luke the doctor says he was covered with it, an advanced case. Jesus reaches out His hand and touches him. "I am willing... Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy leaves him.

News spreads, and huge crowds gather. "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." Here it is again. The busier and more popular He becomes, the more He prays.

One day, Pharisees and teachers of the law from all over have come to hear Jesus teach. Some men bring a paralyzed man on a mat. They can't get through the crowd, so they go up on the roof, remove tiles, and lower him right in front of Jesus. When Jesus sees their faith, He says, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

The religious experts are offended. Only God can forgive sins. Exactly. Jesus asks which is easier, to say your sins are forgiven or to say get up and walk. Then, so they will know He has authority on earth to forgive sins, He tells the man to get up, take his mat, and go home. The man does, praising God.

Next, Jesus sees a tax collector named Levi sitting at his tax booth, and says, "Follow me." Levi gets up, leaves everything, and follows Him. Then he throws a huge party at his house, with a large crowd of tax collectors and other guests.

The Pharisees and their teachers complain to Jesus' disciples: Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? Sharing a meal was a sign of acceptance. Respectable people didn't eat with that crowd.

Jesus' answer is a doctor's answer, which Luke must have loved. Healthy people don't need a doctor; sick people do. He didn't come for people who think they're fine. He came for people who know they need help.

Then they ask why His disciples don't fast like John's disciples and the Pharisees' disciples. Jesus says you don't fast at a wedding while the bridegroom is with you. A time is coming for that. Then He gives a picture: nobody sews a patch from a new garment onto an old one, and nobody pours new wine into old wineskins. What Jesus brings won't fit inside the old religious containers. It will burst them. And Luke adds a line only he records, with a bit of a smile: people who've been drinking old wine don't want the new; they say, "The old is better."

KEY VERSE

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Luke 5:31–32 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Simon obeyed Jesus even though it didn't make sense to him as a fisherman. When have you had to trust God over your own experience?
2. When Simon saw who Jesus really was, he felt like a sinner. Why do you think being near Jesus made him feel that way?
3. Levi threw a party so his friends could meet Jesus. What would it look like for you to introduce your friends to Jesus?

CHAPTER 6

Upside-Down Blessings

Luke 6

One Sabbath, Jesus and His disciples walk through grainfields, and the disciples pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands, and eat. Some Pharisees object: that's harvesting on the Sabbath. Jesus reminds them that David once ate the sacred bread from God's house when he was hungry. Then He makes a staggering claim: "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

On another Sabbath, a man with a shriveled right hand is in the synagogue. (Luke the doctor tells us it was his right hand. Mark and Matthew don't.) The Pharisees watch closely, looking for a reason to accuse Jesus. Jesus knows what they're thinking. He tells the man to stand up in front of everyone, then asks the room: Which is lawful on the Sabbath, to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it? He looks around at all of them, then tells the man to stretch out his hand. It's completely restored. The leaders are furious.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Sabbath**
>
> The Sabbath, from Friday evening to Saturday evening, was a weekly day of rest commanded in the Ten Commandments. It was one of the main things that set Jewish people apart from the nations around them. Over the centuries, teachers developed detailed rules about what counted as work, to make sure no one broke the command by accident. Jesus honored the

> Sabbath. He was regularly in the synagogue. But He rejected the idea that the Sabbath was more important than people in need.

Then comes a moment Luke doesn't want you to miss. Before choosing His twelve apostles, Jesus goes out to a mountainside to pray and spends the night praying to God. The whole night. The next morning He chooses twelve men from among His followers. The list includes fishermen, a tax collector, a political zealot, and Judas Iscariot, "who became a traitor." Jesus prayed all night and still chose Judas. He knew exactly what He was doing.

He comes down and stands on a level place, with a large crowd from all over, including people from the Gentile coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. Power is coming from Him and healing them all. Then He looks at His disciples and starts teaching. This is sometimes called the Sermon on the Plain. It's similar to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, but shorter, sharper, and with a twist.

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Blessed are you who are hungry now, who weep now, who are hated because of the Son of Man. And then Luke includes what Matthew doesn't: woes. Woe to you who are rich, because you've already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, who laugh now, who everyone speaks well of.

That's uncomfortable for most of us. By world standards, if you have a phone, enough food, and a closet full of clothes, you're among the rich. Jesus isn't saying poor people automatically go to heaven and rich people automatically don't. He's saying that wealth and comfort can make you think you don't need God. The people who know they're empty are the ones ready to be filled.

Then Jesus says the hardest thing in the sermon: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.” Bless people who curse you. Pray for people who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, offer the other. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

He pushes it further. If you only love people who love you, what’s special about that? Even sinners do that. Instead, love your enemies, do good to them, and lend without expecting anything back. Then you’ll be children of the Most High, “because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.” That’s how God treats us. “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Don’t judge, and you won’t be judged. Forgive, and you’ll be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you, pressed down, shaken together, running over. Jesus is describing a grain merchant filling a customer’s container so full it spills. That’s how generous God is.

Then He asks a question that should make everyone laugh: Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own? Take out the plank first. Then you’ll see clearly to help with the speck.

A good tree produces good fruit. What comes out of your mouth shows what’s filling your heart. And then He asks, “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” He ends with two builders. One digs down deep and lays a foundation on rock. The other builds without a foundation. When the flood comes, one house stands, and the other collapses completely. Same storm. Different foundation.

KEY VERSE

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

Luke 6:27–28 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus prayed all night before choosing the Twelve. What decisions in your life deserve that kind of prayer?
2. Who is someone it would be really hard for you to love, bless, or pray for? What would one step look like?
3. Jesus said it's possible to call Him "Lord" and not do what He says. Where are you most tempted to do that?

TRY THIS *Pick one person who has treated you badly. Pray for them by name every day this week. Pay attention to what changes in you.*

CHAPTER 7

The Woman with the Jar

Luke 7

Luke 7 is a parade of outsiders. Watch who shows up.

First, a Roman centurion in Capernaum. A centurion commanded about a hundred soldiers, so he was a symbol of the occupying army. His servant, whom he values highly, is sick and about to die. He sends some Jewish elders to ask Jesus for help, and they make an unusual argument: this man deserves it, because he loves our nation and built our synagogue.

Jesus goes with them. But before He reaches the house, the centurion sends friends with a second message: Lord, don't trouble yourself. I don't deserve to have You come under my roof. Just say the word, and my servant will be healed. I'm a man under authority myself. I tell a soldier to go, and he goes.

The elders said he deserved it. He said he didn't. And Jesus is amazed at him. He turns to the crowd and says He hasn't found such great faith even in Israel. The servant is healed. The person Jesus praises for his faith is a Gentile soldier.

Next, Jesus comes to a town called Nain. As He approaches the gate, a funeral procession is coming out. The dead man was "the only son of his mother, and she was a widow." Luke wants you to feel the weight of that. In that world, a widow with no son had no one to

provide for her or protect her. She had just lost her son, and her future along with him.

"When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her." No one asked Him to do anything. He says to her, "Don't cry." Then He walks up and touches the coffin, an open stretcher, and the bearers stop. He tells the young man to get up. The dead man sits up and begins to talk, "and Jesus gave him back to his mother." The crowd is filled with awe: God has come to help His people.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Widows in the Ancient World**
>
> Women in the ancient world usually depended on a father, husband, or son for food, shelter, and legal protection. A widow without grown sons could quickly fall into poverty. That's why the Old Testament repeatedly commands God's people to care for widows and orphans. Luke mentions widows more than any other Gospel: Anna in the temple, the widow of Nain, the persistent widow in a parable, and the poor widow with her two coins.

Then a message comes from John the Baptist, who is sitting in Herod's prison. He sends two disciples with a question: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Even John had doubts. Prison will do that to you.

Jesus doesn't scold him. He tells the messengers to report what they've seen: the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. That's the list from Isaiah, the same mission Jesus announced in Nazareth. Then Jesus praises John to the crowd. Doubting didn't disqualify him.

Then comes one of the most beautiful scenes in Luke. A Pharisee named Simon invites Jesus to dinner. At formal meals, guests reclined on cushions around a low table, leaning on one elbow with

their feet stretched out behind them. Houses were often open, and people from the town could wander in and watch.

A woman from the town who had lived a sinful life learns that Jesus is there. Everyone knows her reputation. She comes in with an alabaster jar of perfume and stands behind Him at His feet, weeping. Her tears fall on His feet, and she wipes them with her hair, kisses His feet, and pours perfume on them.

For a woman to let down her hair in public was shocking. The whole room is uncomfortable. Simon thinks to himself that if Jesus were really a prophet, He'd know what kind of woman is touching Him.

Jesus knows exactly what kind of woman she is, and He knows exactly what Simon is thinking. "Simon, I have something to tell you." Two people owed money to a lender. One owed five hundred days' wages, the other fifty. Neither could pay, so he forgave both debts. Which one will love him more? Simon answers, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

Then Jesus turns toward the woman, but keeps talking to Simon. "Do you see this woman?" You didn't give Me water for My feet. She washed them with her tears. You didn't greet Me with a kiss. She hasn't stopped kissing My feet. You didn't put oil on My head. She poured perfume on My feet.

Simon gave Jesus the bare minimum. She gave Him everything. Simon thought he was the righteous one who didn't need much forgiveness. She knew how much she'd been forgiven. And her love proved it.

Jesus says to her, "Your sins are forgiven." The other guests start whispering: Who is this who even forgives sins? Jesus says to her, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

KEY VERSE

Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.

Luke 7:47 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. John the Baptist had doubts in prison, and Jesus answered him with evidence instead of a lecture. What do you do with your own doubts?
2. Jesus helped the widow of Nain before she asked. What does that tell you about His heart for hurting people?
3. Are you more like Simon or the woman? How much do you think you've been forgiven?

CHAPTER 8

Soil, Storm, and Twelve Years

Luke 8

Luke opens this chapter with a detail the other Gospels mostly skip. As Jesus travels from town to town, the Twelve are with Him, "and also some women." Luke names them: Mary Magdalene, from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna, the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were "helping to support them out of their own means."

Think about that. A woman connected to Herod's palace was helping to fund Jesus' ministry. A woman who had once been tormented by demons was now one of His most loyal followers. In a culture where religious teachers rarely had female disciples, Jesus welcomed them. And these same women will be the ones standing near the cross and the first ones at the empty tomb.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Women Who Followed Jesus**
>
> In first-century Judaism, women generally did not study under rabbis or travel with them. Luke makes a point of showing that women were among Jesus' followers from early on, and that some of them provided financially for His ministry. Mary Magdalene is mentioned more than most of the apostles in the Gospels. Despite later legends, the Bible never says she was a prostitute. What it says is that Jesus set her free from seven demons, and she never left Him.

Then Jesus tells the parable of the sower. A farmer scatters seed. Some falls on the path and gets trampled or eaten by birds. Some falls on rock and withers for lack of moisture. Some falls among thorns, which choke it. And some falls on good soil and produces a crop a hundred times more than was sown.

The disciples ask what it means. The seed is the word of God. The path is people who hear, but the devil takes the word away. The rock is people who receive it with joy but have no root, so they fall away when testing comes. The thorns are people choked by life's worries, riches, and pleasures. The good soil is people with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, hold on to it, and keep going until it produces fruit.

Notice the word "persevering." Good soil isn't about how excited you feel when you first hear. It's about whether you're still holding on months and years later.

Jesus' mother and brothers come to see Him but can't get through the crowd. Jesus says, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." He's not rejecting His family. He's widening it.

Then a storm. Jesus and the disciples are crossing the lake when He falls asleep. A squall comes down, and the boat is filling with water. They wake Him: "Master, Master, we're going to drown!" He gets up, rebukes the wind and the raging waters, and everything goes calm. Then He asks them, "Where is your faith?" They're terrified and amazed: Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water.

On the other side of the lake, in Gentile territory, a man possessed by demons meets them. He hasn't worn clothes for a long time and

lives in the tombs. When Jesus asks his name, he says “Legion,” because many demons had entered him. The demons beg to go into a large herd of pigs, and Jesus allows it. The herd rushes down the bank into the lake and drowns.

The people of the town come out and find the man “sitting at Jesus’ feet, dressed and in his right mind.” That’s the posture of a disciple. And the townspeople are so afraid that they ask Jesus to leave. The man begs to go with Jesus, but Jesus sends him home to tell how much God has done for him. So he goes all over town telling everyone what Jesus did.

Back across the lake, a synagogue leader named Jairus falls at Jesus’ feet. His only daughter, about twelve, is dying. On the way, the crowds almost crush Jesus. In that crowd is a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years. Twelve years. The same length of time Jairus’s daughter has been alive.

Luke the doctor adds an honest detail: no one could heal her. (Mark says she’d spent all her money on doctors and only got worse. Luke, maybe protecting his profession, leaves that part out.) Under the law, her condition made her ceremonially unclean, which meant years of isolation.

She comes up behind Jesus and touches the edge of His cloak, and immediately the bleeding stops. Jesus asks, “Who touched me?” Peter points out that the whole crowd is pushing against Him. But Jesus says He knows power has gone out from Him. The woman, trembling, falls at His feet and tells everyone why she touched Him and how she was healed. Jesus calls her “Daughter.” The woman nobody would touch is welcomed into the family. “your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”

While He's still speaking, someone comes from Jairus's house: your daughter is dead. Don't bother the teacher anymore. Jesus says, "Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed." At the house, everyone is wailing. He tells them she's not dead but asleep, and they laugh at Him. He takes her by the hand and says, "My child, get up!" She stands up at once. And Jesus, practical as ever, tells them to give her something to eat.

KEY VERSE

But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

Luke 8:15 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Which kind of soil best describes your heart right now? What's one "thorn" that tends to choke out your faith?
2. Jesus stopped for a desperate woman even while a powerful man's daughter was dying. What does that tell you about how He values people?
3. Jesus asked His disciples, "Where is your faith?" in the middle of a storm. Where do you need faith in a storm you're facing?

CHAPTER 9

Set Toward Jerusalem

Luke 9

Jesus gives the Twelve power and authority to drive out demons and heal diseases, and sends them out to proclaim the kingdom of God. Take nothing for the journey, He says: no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt. They'll have to depend on God and on the hospitality of others.

Back in his palace, Herod is getting reports about Jesus and is confused. Some people say John the Baptist has come back from the dead. Herod says, I beheaded John. "Who, then, is this I hear such things about?" He tries to see Jesus. He'll finally get his wish near the end of the book, and it won't go well.

When the apostles return, Jesus takes them to Bethsaida to rest. The crowds follow, and He welcomes them, teaches, and heals. As evening comes, the Twelve suggest sending the people away to find food and lodging. Jesus says, "You give them something to eat." They have five loaves and two fish for about five thousand men. Jesus gives thanks, breaks the bread, and gives it to the disciples to distribute. Everyone eats and is satisfied, and the leftovers fill twelve baskets, one for each of the Twelve.

Then, once again, Luke notices that Jesus is praying in private. Afterward He asks His disciples who the crowds say He is. Some say

John the Baptist, some Elijah, some one of the ancient prophets. "But what about you?… Who do you say I am?" Peter answers, "God's Messiah."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What Does "Messiah" Mean?**
>
> "Messiah" is a Hebrew word meaning "anointed one." The Greek equivalent is "Christ." In the Old Testament, kings and priests were anointed with oil when God set them apart for a task. Over time, God's people came to hope for one special Anointed King from David's family who would rescue them and rule forever. By Jesus' time, many expected a military leader who would overthrow Rome. Jesus accepted the title, but He kept redefining it.

Immediately Jesus tells them what being the Messiah will mean: the Son of Man must suffer many things, be rejected by the religious leaders, be killed, and on the third day be raised to life. Then He tells them what following Him will mean. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."

Daily. Only Luke includes that word. Following Jesus isn't a one-time decision you make at camp. It's a decision you make every morning. Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for Jesus will save it. What good is it to gain the whole world and lose yourself?

About eight days later, Jesus takes Peter, John, and James up a mountain to pray. "As he was praying," His face changes, and His clothes become as bright as a flash of lightning. Moses and Elijah appear in glory and talk with Him. Luke is the only one who tells us what they talked about: His "departure," which He was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. The Greek word is exodus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A New Exodus**
>
> In the Old Testament, the exodus was the great rescue when God brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt, led by Moses. When Luke says Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus about His "departure," he uses the Greek word exodus. Luke is hinting that Jesus' death and resurrection in Jerusalem will be a new and greater rescue, setting people free not from Pharaoh but from sin and death.

Peter, half-asleep and not knowing what he's saying, suggests building three shelters. A cloud covers them, and a voice says, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." Then Jesus is alone again.

The next day, a father in the crowd begs Jesus to look at his son, his only child, who is seized by a spirit. The disciples couldn't help. Jesus heals the boy and gives him back to his father. Everyone is amazed. Jesus tells the disciples a second time that He will be betrayed, but they don't understand.

Instead, they argue about which of them will be the greatest. Jesus takes a little child, stands the child beside Him, and says that whoever welcomes this child in His name welcomes Him. "For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest."

Then comes a turning point in Luke's Gospel: "Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." Older translations say He "set His face." From here until chapter 19, Jesus is on the road, heading toward the cross on purpose. Much of the material that's found only in Luke happens on this journey.

Right away He hits resistance. A Samaritan village won't welcome Him because He's heading for Jerusalem. James and John, the "Sons of Thunder," ask if they should call down fire from heaven to destroy the village. Jesus turns and rebukes them. They go to another village instead.

On the road, people volunteer to follow Him, with conditions. One says he'll follow anywhere; Jesus warns that He has no place to lay His head. Another wants to bury his father first. Another wants to say goodbye to his family. Jesus answers that no one who puts a hand to the plow and keeps looking back is fit for service in the kingdom of God. Following Jesus can't be something you'll get around to later.

KEY VERSE

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

Luke 9:23 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus asked, "Who do you say I am?" Not your parents, not your church. You. How would you answer today?
2. What would it look like for you to "take up your cross daily"? What's one thing you'd have to say no to tomorrow morning?
3. James and John wanted to destroy a village that rejected Jesus. Why do you think Jesus rebuked them?

CHAPTER 10

Who Is My Neighbor?

Luke 10

Jesus appoints seventy-two others and sends them out two by two ahead of Him to every town He's about to visit. Some manuscripts say seventy. Either number points back to the list of nations in Genesis, a hint that the message is for the whole world. "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few," Jesus says. Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers.

He warns them that He's sending them out like lambs among wolves. When they come back, they're thrilled: "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." Jesus says He saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. But then He redirects their joy. Don't rejoice that the spirits submit to you. Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

Then Luke shows us something rare. Jesus, "full of joy through the Holy Spirit," prays out loud, thanking the Father for hiding these things from the wise and learned and revealing them to little children. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit all in one sentence, and the mood is joy.

An expert in the law stands up to test Jesus: "Teacher… what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks what the law says. The man answers well: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul,

strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus says, Correct. Do this and you will live.

But the man wants to justify himself, so he asks, "And who is my neighbor?" He's looking for a limit. Who exactly do I have to love? Where does my responsibility end?

Jesus answers with a story. A man is traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho. He's attacked by robbers, stripped, beaten, and left half dead. A priest happens to be going down the same road. He sees the man and passes by on the other side. A Levite, a temple worker, does the same.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Jericho Road**
>
> The road from Jerusalem to Jericho dropped about 3,300 feet in roughly seventeen miles through rocky, desolate country. It was known for bandits who hid among the rocks. Jesus' listeners would have known exactly what kind of road He meant. The priest and Levite may have worried that the man was dead, since touching a corpse would make them ceremonially unclean and unable to serve in the temple. Jesus doesn't bother to explain their reasons. Whatever they were, they kept walking.

Everyone listening expects the third person in the story to be an ordinary Jewish man, the hero. Instead, Jesus says, "But a Samaritan."

You have to understand how shocking that was. Jews and Samaritans had hated each other for centuries. They disagreed about the right place to worship and accused each other of corrupting the faith. Remember the Samaritan village that just refused to welcome Jesus? A Jewish audience would have expected the Samaritan to be the villain, not the hero.

The Samaritan sees the man and takes pity on him. He bandages his wounds, pouring on oil and wine, which were basic first aid. He puts the man on his own donkey and takes him to an inn. He pays the innkeeper two denarii, about two days' wages, and promises to cover anything more when he comes back. He doesn't just feel sorry. He spends his time, his money, and his safety.

Then Jesus flips the question. The expert had asked, Who is my neighbor? Jesus asks, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert can't even bring himself to say "the Samaritan." He says, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus tells him, "Go and do likewise."

The question isn't who deserves my love. The question is whether I will be a neighbor to whoever is in front of me. Even if that person is someone I've been taught to look down on.

The chapter ends in a home. Jesus visits two sisters, Martha and Mary. Martha opens her home and gets busy with all the preparations. Mary sits at the Lord's feet listening to what He says. That's the posture of a disciple, and women didn't usually get to take it.

Martha finally snaps. Lord, don't You care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me! Jesus answers gently. "Martha, Martha… you are worried and upset about many things." Only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it won't be taken away from her.

Jesus isn't saying serving is bad. He's saying that being busy for Jesus can crowd out being with Jesus. Martha was doing a lot for Him. Mary was paying attention to Him.

KEY VERSE

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Luke 10:36–37 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. If Jesus told the Good Samaritan story at your school, who would the "Samaritan" be? Who would be the most shocking hero?
2. The expert wanted to know where his responsibility ended. When are you tempted to look for the minimum?
3. Are you more of a Martha or a Mary? What would help you sit at Jesus' feet this week?

TRY THIS *This week, look for one person who's "on the side of the road" at school or online: ignored, hurting, left out. Do one concrete thing to help, even if it costs you something.*

CHAPTER 11

Teach Us to Pray

Luke 11

"One day Jesus was praying in a certain place." By now you shouldn't be surprised. When He finishes, one of His disciples asks, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Think about that request. They'd watched Jesus heal, cast out demons, and feed thousands. They never asked Him to teach them how to do miracles. They asked Him to teach them how to pray. They'd figured out where His power came from.

Jesus gives them a short prayer, a version of what we call the Lord's Prayer. Father, may Your name be honored as holy. May Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation. It's simple enough for a child, deep enough for a lifetime.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **"Father"**
>
> Jewish prayers often addressed God with titles of majesty: Lord, King of the universe, Holy One. Calling God "Father" was not unheard of, but Jesus made it the center of how He prayed and how He taught His followers to pray. It suggests closeness, trust, and belonging. Through Jesus, people who were far from God are invited to speak to Him the way a child speaks to a loving parent.

Then Jesus tells a funny story. Imagine you go to a friend's house at midnight and bang on the door: a friend of mine just showed up from a trip, and I have nothing to feed him. Lend me three loaves of bread. Your friend yells from inside: Don't bother me. The door is locked. My kids are asleep in bed with me. In a one-room house, the whole family slept together on a mat. Getting up meant waking everyone.

Jesus says that even if he won't get up because you're his friend, he'll get up because of your "shameless audacity." You just won't stop knocking. Then Jesus says, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

The point isn't that God is a grumpy neighbor who has to be nagged. The point is the opposite. If even a sleepy neighbor will help, how much more will God? Which father, if his son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? If you, even though you're evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, "how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Notice what Luke says the Father gives. Matthew's version says "good gifts." Luke says the Holy Spirit. The best answer to prayer isn't always the thing you asked for. It's more of God Himself.

Next, Jesus drives out a demon from a man who couldn't speak, and some people claim He's doing it by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. Jesus points out how ridiculous that is. A kingdom divided against itself falls. Why would Satan fight against himself? "But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."

A woman in the crowd calls out, Blessed is the mother who gave You birth and nursed You. Jesus replies, "Blessed rather are those

who hear the word of God and obey it." Being close to Jesus physically isn't the point. Obeying Him is.

The crowds keep growing, and Jesus warns them: "This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign." The only sign they'll get is the sign of Jonah. Jonah was a sign to the people of Nineveh, and they repented. Someone greater than Jonah is here, and these people aren't listening.

Then a Pharisee invites Jesus to eat, and Jesus doesn't do the ceremonial hand washing before the meal. The host is surprised. Jesus uses the moment to get to the real issue. You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. Didn't the One who made the outside make the inside too?

Then He pronounces six woes, three on the Pharisees and three on the experts in the law. They tithe even their garden herbs but neglect justice and the love of God. They love the most important seats and respectful greetings. They load people with heavy religious burdens and won't lift a finger to help. They honor the prophets their ancestors killed. And they've "taken away the key to knowledge," refusing to enter and blocking others from entering too.

By the end of the meal, the Pharisees and teachers of the law are furious. They begin waiting to catch Jesus in something He might say.

KEY VERSE

So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

Luke 11:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, not to do miracles. What does that tell you about what they saw in Him?
2. Jesus said the Father gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask. Have you ever asked God for more of Himself instead of just for things?
3. Jesus said the Pharisees cleaned the outside of the cup but not the inside. What's the difference between looking good and being good?

TRY THIS *Pray the Lord's Prayer slowly once a day this week. Stop after each line and put it into your own words.*

CHAPTER 12

Bigger Barns

Luke 12

The crowd around Jesus has grown to thousands, so many that people are trampling on each other. And Jesus starts by warning His disciples: “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” Everything hidden will be revealed. What you whisper in private will be shouted from the rooftops.

Then He tells them not to fear people who can kill the body and then can do nothing more. Fear God. But that isn’t meant to scare them. Five sparrows are sold for two pennies, and God doesn’t forget a single one. “Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” You are worth more than many sparrows.

Someone in the crowd calls out: Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me. It’s a family fight about money. Jesus refuses to be the judge. Instead He goes to the heart of the problem: “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

Then He tells a story found only in Luke. The ground of a certain rich man produces a huge crop. He thinks to himself: What should I do? I don’t have room to store everything. I know! I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll say to myself, You’ve got

plenty saved up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry.

Listen to how many times he says "I" and "my." He talks only to himself. He never thinks about God or about anyone else who might need what he has.

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you.'" And then who will get everything you've stored up? That's how it will be for anyone who stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Barns and Bigger Barns**
>
> In an agricultural economy, a bumper crop was a gift from God and a chance to provide for others. The Old Testament law required farmers to leave the edges of their fields and the leftovers of the harvest for the poor, foreigners, widows, and orphans. The rich fool's sin wasn't that he had a good year. It was that he treated the harvest as his alone, as if he would live forever and no one else needed it.

Jesus turns to His disciples and says, Don't worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. Consider the ravens. They don't plant or harvest, they don't have barns, and God feeds them. Can worrying add a single hour to your life? Consider how the wildflowers grow. Not even Solomon in all his royal clothes was dressed like one of them.

Instead, "seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well." Then He adds one of the gentlest lines in Luke: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Get the kind of treasure that can't be stolen or eaten by moths. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

That last line works in both directions. Your heart follows your money. If you want to know what you really love, look at where your money and time go.

Then Jesus talks about being ready. Be dressed and ready for service, like servants waiting for their master to come home from a wedding banquet, so they can open the door the moment he knocks. And here's the surprise: when the master comes and finds them ready, he will dress himself to serve, have them recline at the table, and wait on them. The master serves the servants. That's the kind of Lord Jesus is.

Peter asks if this story is just for the disciples or for everyone. Jesus answers with another picture: a manager put in charge of a household. If he's faithful while the master is away, he'll be put in charge of more. If he starts beating the other servants and getting drunk, the master will come back on a day he doesn't expect. "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded."

Then Jesus says something startling. He has come to bring fire on the earth, and He wishes it were already kindled. Do you think He came to bring peace on earth? No, but division. Families will be divided over Him. He isn't saying He wants families to fight. He's saying that following Him is so serious that not everyone will go along with it, even at home.

He ends by calling the crowd hypocrites. They can read the weather from clouds and wind. Why can't they interpret the present time? Something huge is happening right in front of them, and they're missing it.

KEY VERSE

Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.

Luke 12:15 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The rich fool only talked to himself. Who do you talk to when you're making big decisions?
2. What do you worry about most? What would it look like to "seek his kingdom" in that area?
3. Jesus said your heart follows your treasure. If someone looked at how you spend your money and time, what would they say you treasure?

CHAPTER 13

The Narrow Door

Luke 13

Some people bring Jesus the latest breaking news. Pilate's soldiers have killed some Galileans while they were offering sacrifices, mixing their blood with the blood of the animals. It's a horrifying story, and the people telling it seem to want Jesus' opinion: Those victims must have done something really bad, right?

Jesus asks a question back. Do you think they were worse sinners than everyone else in Galilee because they suffered this way? "I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." Then He brings up another tragedy: eighteen people killed when a tower in Siloam fell on them. Were they more guilty than everyone else in Jerusalem? No. Same warning.

People still ask the same question today when disaster strikes: Why did God let this happen to them? Jesus refuses to treat tragedy as proof that the victims were especially bad. But He also refuses to let His listeners off the hook. The real question isn't why bad things happened to them. It's whether you're ready to stand before God yourself.

Then He tells a short parable. A man has a fig tree in his vineyard, but for three years it hasn't produced any fruit. He tells the gardener to cut it down. The gardener asks for one more year. Let

me dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine. If not, then cut it down. God is patient. But His patience is an invitation, not a permanent excuse.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Tower of Siloam**
>
> Siloam was an area in the southern part of Jerusalem with a famous pool, the same pool where Jesus would later send a blind man to wash in John's Gospel. Archaeologists have excavated the Pool of Siloam, including steps that date to the time of Jesus. We don't know anything else about the tower collapse Jesus mentions, but His listeners clearly did. It was the kind of local tragedy everyone was talking about.

On a Sabbath, Jesus is teaching in a synagogue, and a woman is there who has been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She is bent over and can't straighten up at all. For eighteen years, she has stared at the ground.

Jesus sees her and calls her forward. Notice that she doesn't ask for anything. He says, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." He puts His hands on her, and immediately she straightens up and praises God.

The synagogue leader is indignant, and instead of speaking to Jesus directly, he scolds the crowd: There are six days for work. Come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath. Jesus calls out the hypocrisy. Every one of you unties your ox or donkey on the Sabbath to lead it to water. Shouldn't this woman, "a daughter of Abraham," whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day? His opponents are humiliated, and the people are delighted.

Jesus calls her a daughter of Abraham. That was a title of honor. Nobody else in the room would have given it to her.

Then He describes the kingdom of God with two tiny pictures. It's like a mustard seed that grows into a tree big enough for birds to perch in. It's like a little yeast that works all through a large batch of dough. The kingdom starts small and quiet, almost invisible, and then it spreads everywhere.

As He continues toward Jerusalem, someone asks Him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" It's the kind of question people love to argue about. Jesus doesn't answer it the way they want. Instead He makes it personal: "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door." Many will try and won't be able to.

He describes the owner of a house getting up and closing the door. People outside knock and say, We ate and drank with you; you taught in our streets! And he answers, I don't know you or where you come from. Knowing about Jesus, being near Jesus, even attending His events, isn't the same as knowing Him.

Then the twist. People will come from east and west and north and south and take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. The ones who assumed they'd be inside will find themselves outside, and outsiders from every direction will be seated at the table. "There are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last."

Some Pharisees warn Jesus to leave because Herod wants to kill Him. Jesus calls Herod "that fox" and says He'll keep doing His work until He reaches His goal, because no prophet can die outside Jerusalem.

Then His voice changes. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets." How often He has longed to gather her children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, "and you were not

willing!" It's not anger. It's heartbreak. Jesus is heading toward a city that will reject Him, and He loves it anyway.

KEY VERSE

Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.

Luke 13:30 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. When something terrible happens, why do people tend to ask whether the victims deserved it? How did Jesus answer that question?
2. The bent-over woman didn't ask for help. Jesus noticed her. Who in your life might need someone to notice them?
3. Someone asked how many will be saved, and Jesus said, Make sure you go through the door. Why do you think He made the question personal?

CHAPTER 14

Pull Up a Chair

Luke 14

Food is everywhere in Luke. Jesus is always eating with someone, and the meals keep turning into lessons. This chapter is one long dinner party.

On a Sabbath, Jesus goes to eat at the house of a prominent Pharisee, and He's being carefully watched. In front of Him is a man suffering from abnormal swelling of his body. (Luke uses a medical term for the condition.) Jesus asks the Pharisees and experts in the law if it's lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Silence. So He heals the man and sends him on his way. Then He asks: If your son or your ox fell into a well on the Sabbath, wouldn't you pull him out right away? Silence again.

Then He watches the guests. They're all scrambling for the places of honor at the table, the seats closest to the host. Seating arrangements at a banquet showed everyone your social rank. Think of the lunch table at school, where where you sit says a lot about where you stand.

Jesus gives them some advice. When you're invited to a wedding feast, don't take the best seat. Someone more important than you might show up, and the host will ask you to move, and you'll be humiliated in front of everyone. Instead, take the lowest place.

Then the host may come and say, “Friend, move up to a better place.” Then you’ll be honored in front of everybody.

It sounds like etiquette. But Jesus is describing how God’s kingdom works. “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Then He turns to the host. When you give a lunch or dinner, don’t invite your friends, relatives, or rich neighbors. They’ll just invite you back, and you’ll be repaid. “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,” and you will be blessed. They can’t repay you. You’ll be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Honor and Shame**
>
> In the ancient Mediterranean world, honor was one of the most valuable things a person could have. It came from your family, your wealth, your reputation, and your connections. Meals were a way to gain and display honor. You invited people who could raise your status and expected them to return the favor. Inviting people who could never repay you, and who might even lower your reputation, went against the whole system. Jesus didn’t just adjust the system. He turned it inside out.

One of the guests, trying to sound spiritual, says, Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God! Jesus answers with another story.

A man is preparing a great banquet and invites many guests. When everything is ready, he sends his servant to tell them, Come, it’s ready. “But they all alike began to make excuses.” One just bought a field and needs to go see it. Another just bought five pairs of oxen and wants to try them out. Another just got married and can’t come.

Those excuses are ridiculous. Nobody buys a field without looking at it first. Nobody buys oxen without testing them. And the guests had already accepted the invitation earlier. They're not busy. They're insulting the host.

The owner is angry. He tells his servant to go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. The servant does, and there's still room. So the master sends him out again, beyond the town to the roads and country lanes, to urge people to come in so his house will be full.

The people who thought they had a guaranteed seat stayed home. The people who never expected an invitation ended up at the table. That's Luke's whole Gospel in one story.

Then Jesus turns to the large crowds traveling with Him and says something designed to thin them out. Anyone who comes to Him and doesn't hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even their own life, can't be His disciple. That's a Hebrew way of speaking. "Hate" here means "love less by comparison." Jesus isn't telling you to despise your family. He's saying your loyalty to Him has to be so strong that every other loyalty looks small next to it.

Then He tells two short stories. Suppose you want to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and figure out the cost, so you don't end up with a foundation and no money to finish? People will laugh at you. Or suppose a king is about to go to war against a bigger army. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he can win? "In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples."

Jesus never tricked anyone into following Him. He didn't hide the fine print. He told people up front what it would cost.

KEY VERSE

For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Luke 14:11 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Where do you see people scrambling for the "best seat" at your school or online? Where do you do it?
2. Jesus said to invite people who can't pay you back. Who would that be in your world?
3. Jesus told people to count the cost before following Him. What has following Jesus cost you so far? What might it cost in the future?

TRY THIS *This week, sit with someone at lunch who usually sits alone, or invite someone into your group who's usually left out.*

CHAPTER 15

Lost and Found

Luke 15

If you only read one chapter of Luke, read this one.

It starts with a complaint. “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.” All of them. The religious crowd is not happy. The Pharisees and teachers of the law mutter, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

They meant it as an insult. It’s actually one of the best descriptions of Jesus ever spoken.

So Jesus tells three stories. They’re really one story told three ways, each one building on the last.

First: a shepherd has a hundred sheep and loses one. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he doesn’t scold it. He puts it on his shoulders, joyfully, and carries it home. He calls his friends and neighbors: Celebrate with me, I’ve found my lost sheep! Jesus says there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who don’t need to repent.

Second: a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. She lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches carefully until she finds it. Then she calls her friends and neighbors to celebrate. “In the same

way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Ten Silver Coins**

The coin in the second story was a drachma, worth about a day's wages. Ten of them may have been a woman's savings, or possibly part of her dowry, sometimes worn on a headdress. Village houses were often dark, with small windows and dirt or stone floors, so a coin could easily get lost in a crack. That's why she lights a lamp and sweeps. Notice that Jesus uses a woman to picture God searching for the lost. The religious teachers listening would not have expected that.

Third: "There was a man who had two sons." The younger son asks for his share of the inheritance now. In that culture, that was like saying, Dad, I wish you were dead. I want your money, not you. Amazingly, the father divides his property between them.

The younger son packs everything and goes to a distant country, where he wastes it all on wild living. Then a severe famine hits. He's broke and desperate, and he takes a job feeding pigs for a foreigner. For a Jewish listener, you can't get any lower than that. Pigs were unclean. He's so hungry that he wishes he could eat the pigs' food, and no one gives him anything.

"When he came to his senses," he realizes his father's hired workers have more than enough food, and here he is starving. He decides to go home and say: Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants. He practices the speech. He's hoping for a job, not a family.

He starts the long walk home. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him." The father had been watching the road. He's

filled with compassion. He runs to his son, throws his arms around him, and kisses him.

In that culture, a respectable older man did not run. He would have to pull up his long robe and show his legs, which was considered humiliating. The father doesn't care. He'd rather be embarrassed in front of the whole village than make his son walk that road alone.

The son starts his speech, but the father doesn't even let him finish. He calls to his servants: Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

The robe meant honor. The ring meant authority and belonging. Sandals meant he was a son, because servants usually went barefoot. The son came home hoping to be a servant. The father wouldn't hear of it.

But the story isn't over. The older son is out in the field. As he comes near the house, he hears music and dancing. A servant tells him what happened. The older brother becomes angry and refuses to go in.

So the father goes out to him too. He goes out to both of his sons. The older son unloads: All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed you. You never gave me even a young goat to celebrate with my friends. "But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home," you kill the fattened calf for him!

Notice he doesn't say "my brother." He says "this son of yours." And notice he describes his relationship with his father as "slaving." He's

been in the house the whole time, and he's just as lost as his brother was. One son was lost in a far country. The other was lost at home.

The father answers gently: My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

And then the story ends. Jesus doesn't tell us whether the older brother went in to the party. That's on purpose. Remember who He's talking to: the Pharisees and teachers of the law who were complaining that He welcomed sinners. They are the older brother. The story ends with the door open and the music playing, waiting to see whether they'll come in.

KEY VERSE

For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

Luke 15:24 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. All three stories end with a party. What does that tell you about how God feels when someone comes back to Him?
2. Are you more like the younger son or the older son? What would "coming home" look like for you?
3. Why do you think Jesus left the ending open? If you were the older brother, would you go in?

TRY THIS *Read Luke 15 out loud, all the way through, in one sitting. Then write a short ending for the older brother's story.*

CHAPTER 16

A Chasm Between

Luke 16

This chapter has two stories about money, and both are surprising.

The first is one of the strangest parables Jesus ever told. A rich man has a manager, someone who handles his business. The manager is accused of wasting his master's possessions. The master calls him in: Give an account of your management, because you can't be manager any longer.

The manager panics. He's not strong enough to dig ditches, and he's too ashamed to beg. So he comes up with a plan. Before his firing becomes official, he calls in each person who owes his master money. How much do you owe? A hundred jugs of olive oil. Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty. How much do you owe? A thousand bushels of wheat. Make it eight hundred. He's making friends who will take care of him once he's out of a job.

And then the twist: "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly."

Wait. Is Jesus praising cheating? No. The manager is still called dishonest. What the master admires is that he was smart about the future. He saw trouble coming and used the resources he had right now to prepare for it. Jesus says the people of this world are often

smarter about their worldly future than God's people are about their eternal future.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Debts and Managers**
>
> Wealthy landowners in the ancient world often had managers who ran their estates, rented land to tenant farmers, and collected payments in the form of crops. The bills in the parable may have included hidden interest or the manager's own commission. By reducing them, the manager may have been cutting his own share, or he may simply have been giving away his master's money. Either way, the debtors would have been grateful, and the master's generosity would have looked good in public.

So what's the lesson? Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it's gone, you'll be welcomed into eternal dwellings. In other words, money won't last. Use it for things that will. Then Jesus adds a principle: whoever can be trusted with very little can be trusted with much. If you can't be trusted with money, who will trust you with true riches? "No one can serve two masters." You cannot serve both God and money.

The Pharisees, "who loved money," hear all this and sneer at Him. Jesus tells them that what people value highly is detestable in God's sight. Then He tells a second story, one found only in Luke.

There was a rich man dressed in purple and fine linen who lived in luxury every day. Purple dye was incredibly expensive. This man wore designer clothes every day and threw a party every night. At his gate lay a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores, longing to eat whatever fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

Notice something. The rich man has no name in the story. The poor man does. In the parables recorded in the Gospels, Lazarus is the only character Jesus gives a name to, apart from Abraham, a real

figure from Israel's history. To everyone else, Lazarus was invisible. To God, he was known by name. His name is a form of the Hebrew name Eleazar, which means "God has helped."

The time comes when the beggar dies, and the angels carry him to Abraham's side. The rich man also dies and is buried. In Hades, where he is in torment, he looks up and sees Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.

The rich man calls out, asking Abraham to send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue. Even now, he still sees Lazarus as a servant to be sent. Abraham answers that during his lifetime he received good things while Lazarus received bad things. Now Lazarus is comforted, and he is in agony. And there's a great chasm between them that no one can cross.

So the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers, so they won't end up in this place too. Abraham says, They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them. No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent. And Abraham gives the final line of the story: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

That line lands hard, because someone is about to rise from the dead. And many still won't believe.

The rich man's sin wasn't being rich. It was stepping over Lazarus every day and never really seeing him. The chasm in the afterlife was just the permanent version of the gap he'd kept between them his whole life.

This is a parable, so we shouldn't treat every detail as a map of the afterlife. But the warning is real. How we treat the poor matters to

God. And the choices we make in this life have consequences that last forever.

KEY VERSE

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

Luke 16:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The dishonest manager planned ahead for his future. How are you preparing for your eternal future?
2. Who are the people "at the gate" in your world, people who are easy to step over and not really see?
3. Abraham said people who won't listen to Scripture won't be convinced even by a resurrection. Why do you think that's true?

CHAPTER 17

Only One Came Back

Luke 17

Jesus starts this chapter with some hard teaching for His disciples. Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to the person who causes them. It would be better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around your neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble.

"So watch yourselves." If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them. And if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and come back seven times saying, I repent, you must forgive them.

The apostles' response is honest: "Increase our faith!" That sounds impossible. We're going to need help.

Jesus says that if they had faith as small as a mustard seed, they could tell a mulberry tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it would obey. It isn't about how much faith you have. It's about who your faith is in. A tiny faith in a great God can do great things.

Then a short parable about servants. When a servant comes in from plowing the field, does the master tell him to sit down and eat? No. He says, Get my dinner ready, and you can eat after. So when you've done everything you were told to do, you should say, We are unworthy servants; we've only done our duty. Obedience isn't a way

to earn credit with God. It's just the normal life of someone who belongs to Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Samaritans**
>
> Samaritans lived in the region between Galilee and Judea. They worshiped the God of Israel and accepted the five books of Moses, but they had their own temple on Mount Gerizim and their own version of Israel's history. Many Jews saw them as half-breeds and heretics. Many Samaritans returned the hostility. Some Jewish travelers would cross the Jordan River and go the long way around to avoid passing through Samaria.

Still on His way to Jerusalem, Jesus travels along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As He's entering a village, ten men with leprosy meet Him. They stand at a distance, as the law required, and call out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"

Jesus tells them to go show themselves to the priests. That's what a person was supposed to do after being healed from a skin disease, to be declared clean and allowed back into the community. But they haven't been healed yet. Jesus is asking them to start walking before anything changes.

They go. "And as they went, they were cleansed."

Then Luke slows down for one man. "One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice." He throws himself at Jesus' feet and thanks Him. "And he was a Samaritan."

Jesus asks, Weren't all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? Then He says to the man, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

All ten got healed. Only one came back. And the one who came back was the outsider, the one nobody expected. Nine received a gift. One met the Giver.

The Pharisees ask Jesus when the kingdom of God will come. He tells them the kingdom isn't something you can track with careful observation. "The kingdom of God is in your midst." It was standing right in front of them, and they were asking when it would arrive.

Then He tells His disciples about the day the Son of Man will return. People will say, Look, there He is! Don't run after them. When He comes, it will be as obvious as lightning that lights up the whole sky. But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.

He compares the end to the days of Noah and the days of Lot. People were eating, drinking, marrying, buying, selling, planting, building, completely ordinary life, and then judgment came suddenly. "Remember Lot's wife!" She was rescued from Sodom but looked back longingly at the life she was leaving. Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Missing Verse**
>
> If you look at Luke 17 in the NIV, you'll notice that verse 36 is missing, with a footnote. The earliest and most reliable manuscripts of Luke don't include it. Later copies added a line similar to Matthew 24:40. Modern translations like the NIV keep the verse numbers that older Bibles used, so they skip the number and explain why in a note. Nothing is being hidden. It's an honest sign of careful work.

KEY VERSE

One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

Luke 17:15–16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus said to forgive someone even seven times in a day. Who is hardest for you to keep forgiving?
2. The ten lepers had to start walking before they were healed. When has God asked you to obey before you could see the result?
3. Why do you think only one of the ten came back? What keeps you from thanking God?

TRY THIS *Make a list of ten things God has given you this year. Then go back, like the Samaritan did, and thank Him for each one by name.*

CHAPTER 18

Two Men Went Up to Pray

Luke 18

Luke tells us exactly why Jesus told the next parable: to show His disciples "that they should always pray and not give up."

In a certain town there was a judge who didn't fear God or care what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with a plea: Grant me justice against my adversary. Remember, a widow had almost no power. She had no money for bribes and no husband to speak for her. All she had was persistence.

For a while the judge refuses. But finally he says to himself, Even though I don't care about God or people, this widow keeps bothering me, so I'll make sure she gets justice, "so that she won't eventually come and attack me!" Jesus is being funny here. The Greek verb literally means to strike under the eye, so some translators think the judge is afraid of a black eye. Others think it's a figure of speech for wearing him out. Either way, the picture is a powerful judge worn down by a powerless widow.

Then Jesus makes the point. If even an unjust judge eventually gives in, won't God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night? He won't keep putting them off. God isn't like the judge. He's the opposite. Then Jesus asks a question that hangs

in the air: When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Temple and Prayer**
>
> The temple in Jerusalem held daily services in the morning and the afternoon, with sacrifices and prayers. Many people went up to the temple courts at those times to pray. Pharisees were respected for their careful obedience to the law. They fasted twice a week, more than the law required, and tithed everything, even small garden herbs. Tax collectors were seen as traitors who got rich by cheating their own people. Everyone listening would have known who the good guy and the bad guy were supposed to be.

Then Jesus tells a parable "to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else." Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee stands by himself and prays about himself: God, I thank You that I'm not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, "or even like this tax collector." I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. Technically he's praying, but he's really giving God his résumé. And he's comparing himself to the guy in the back.

"But the tax collector stood at a distance." He won't even look up to heaven. He beats his chest, a sign of deep grief, and says, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Then Jesus says the shocking part: the tax collector, not the Pharisee, went home justified before God. "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

The Pharisee's problem wasn't that he obeyed God. It was that he trusted in his obedience and looked down on others. The tax collector had nothing to offer. He just asked for mercy. And mercy is the only way anyone gets right with God.

Right after that, people are bringing babies to Jesus to have Him touch them. The disciples rebuke the parents. Jesus is too important for this. But Jesus calls the children to Him and says, Let the little children come to Me, and don't stop them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Anyone who won't receive the kingdom like a little child will never enter it. Babies can't earn anything. They just receive.

Then a ruler asks Him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus lists some commandments. The ruler says he's kept them all since he was a boy. Jesus says, "You still lack one thing." Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you'll have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me.

The man becomes very sad, because he's very wealthy. Jesus looks at him and says how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom. It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. The listeners ask, Then who can be saved? "What is impossible with man is possible with God."

The rich ruler and the tax collector in the temple are opposites. One asked what he could do. The other asked for mercy. The one who thought he had everything walked away sad. The one who knew he had nothing went home right with God.

Peter says, We've left everything to follow You. Jesus promises that no one who has left home or family for the kingdom will fail to receive much more in this age, and eternal life in the age to come.

Then He tells the Twelve, for the third time, exactly what's going to happen in Jerusalem: He will be handed over to the Gentiles, mocked, insulted, spit on, flogged, and killed. On the third day He will rise again. They don't understand any of it.

As Jesus approaches Jericho, a blind man is sitting by the roadside begging. When he hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, he calls out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The people in front tell him to be quiet, but he shouts even louder. Jesus stops and asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" "Lord, I want to see." Jesus says, Receive your sight; your faith has healed you. Immediately he can see, and he follows Jesus, praising God.

A blind beggar shouting for mercy gets more than a rich ruler with a perfect record. That's how Luke's Gospel works.

KEY VERSE

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Luke 18:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus said to always pray and not give up. What have you stopped praying about? Why?
2. When are you tempted to compare yourself to others to feel better about yourself?
3. The rich ruler asked what he could do; the tax collector asked for mercy. Which kind of prayer is easier for you? Why?

CHAPTER 19

Up a Tree

Luke 19

Jericho was a wealthy city, a center of trade on the road to Jerusalem. And in Jericho lived a man named Zacchaeus. Luke gives us three facts about him: he was a chief tax collector, he was wealthy, and he was short.

A chief tax collector wasn't just a tax collector. He was the boss of the tax collectors, the one getting a cut of everyone else's cut. If regular tax collectors were hated, Zacchaeus was public enemy number one. He was rich, and everyone knew exactly how he'd gotten that way.

He wants to see who Jesus is, but because of the crowd and his height, he can't. Nobody is going to let him squeeze to the front. So he runs ahead and climbs a sycamore-fig tree to see Him.

Picture this. A wealthy, important man, dressed in expensive clothes, running down the road and climbing a tree like a ten-year-old. Grown men in that culture didn't run, and they definitely didn't climb trees. Zacchaeus doesn't care how it looks. He's desperate to see Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Sycamore-Fig**

The sycamore-fig is not the same as the sycamore tree common in North America. It's a sturdy, wide tree with low, spreading branches, easy to climb,

> and with thick leaves that could partly hide someone. Jericho, in the warm Jordan Valley, was famous for its trees and gardens. Zacchaeus may have chosen that tree not only to see Jesus but also to watch without being seen.

When Jesus reaches the spot, He looks up and calls him by name: "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

Jesus knew his name. Nobody introduced them. And of all the houses in Jericho, Jesus picks the one belonging to the most hated man in town. He doesn't say, I'd like to stay with you. He says, I must. It's part of His mission.

Zacchaeus comes down at once and welcomes Him gladly. And the crowd? "All the people saw this and began to mutter." He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.

But something happens to Zacchaeus that no lecture could have done. He stands up and says, Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I've cheated anybody out of anything, I'll pay back four times the amount.

Nobody told him to do that. Jesus didn't give him a list of rules. He just accepted him, and the acceptance changed him. The law only required paying back the amount plus a fifth in many cases. Zacchaeus goes way beyond it. Remember the rich ruler in the last chapter who walked away sad because he couldn't let go of his money? Zacchaeus lets go of it with joy.

Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham." The town had written him off. Jesus brings him back into the family. Then He explains why: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

That's the whole Gospel of Luke in one sentence. Jesus came looking. The shepherd for the sheep. The woman for the coin. The father for his sons. And Jesus for Zacchaeus, up a tree. He's still looking.

Because they are near Jerusalem and the people think the kingdom is about to appear any minute, Jesus tells a parable about a man of noble birth who goes to a distant country to be made king. Before he leaves, he gives ten servants money to put to work. Some of his subjects hate him and send a delegation saying they don't want him as king.

When he returns as king, he calls his servants to account. One has turned his money into ten times as much and is put in charge of ten cities. Another has made five times as much and gets five cities. But one comes and says, Here's your money. I kept it wrapped up in a cloth, because I was afraid of you. The king takes it away from him. And those enemies who didn't want him as king face judgment.

Jesus is about to go away and come back as King. The question for His followers is what they'll do with what He's given them while He's gone. Playing it safe isn't faithfulness.

Then Jesus approaches Jerusalem. He sends two disciples ahead to bring a colt that has never been ridden. They throw their cloaks on it and put Jesus on it, and as He goes along, people spread their cloaks on the road. When He comes near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples begins joyfully praising God, shouting, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" and "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Some Pharisees in the crowd tell Jesus to rebuke His disciples. Jesus answers that if they keep quiet, “the stones will cry out.”

Then, as He sees the city, He weeps over it. If only you had known on this day what would bring you peace. But now it is hidden from your eyes. He predicts that enemies will surround the city and tear it down, not leaving one stone on another, because they didn’t recognize the time of God’s coming to them. Forty years later, Roman armies did exactly that.

The crowd is cheering, and Jesus is crying. He sees what they can’t.

He enters the temple and drives out those who are selling, saying that God’s house is meant to be a house of prayer, and they’ve made it “a den of robbers.” Every day He teaches at the temple. The chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the leaders want to kill Him, but they can’t find a way, “because all the people hung on his words.”

KEY VERSE

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham."

Luke 19:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Zacchaeus didn't care how he looked as long as he could see Jesus. What keeps you from going after Jesus that wholeheartedly?
2. Jesus chose to stay with the most hated man in town, and the crowd grumbled. Who would the crowd grumble about if Jesus went to their house today?
3. Nobody told Zacchaeus to give his money away. Why do you think meeting Jesus changed him so quickly?

TRY THIS *Read Luke 19:10 every morning this week. Each day, ask God to show you someone who feels lost, and find one way to show them they're noticed.*

CHAPTER 20

Trick Questions

Luke 20

It's the final week. Jesus is teaching in the temple courts every day, and the religious leaders are taking turns trying to trap Him. This chapter is a series of verbal ambushes. Watch how He handles each one.

Round one: the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders confront Him. "Tell us by what authority you are doing these things." Who gave You the right to clear out the temple and teach here?

Jesus answers with His own question. John's baptism, was it from heaven, or of human origin? They huddle. If they say from heaven, He'll ask why they didn't believe John. If they say human, the crowd will stone them, because everyone believes John was a prophet. So they say they don't know. Jesus says, then neither will I tell you. They weren't really asking. They were trapping. So He doesn't play.

Then He tells a parable. A man plants a vineyard, rents it to some farmers, and goes away for a long time. At harvest time he sends a servant to collect some of the fruit. The tenants beat him and send him away empty-handed. He sends another servant, and another. Each is beaten and thrown out. Finally the owner says, I'll send my son, whom I love. Maybe they'll respect him. But when the tenants

see the son, they decide to kill him so the inheritance will be theirs. They throw him out of the vineyard and kill him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Vineyard**
>
> In the Old Testament, Israel is often pictured as God's vineyard. Isaiah 5 contains a famous song about a vineyard that God planted and cared for but that produced only bad fruit. Jesus' listeners would have recognized the image right away. The servants in the parable represent the prophets God sent to His people over the centuries, many of whom were rejected or killed. The beloved son is Jesus Himself.

What will the owner do? He'll come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. The people listening say, "God forbid!" Jesus looks directly at them and quotes a psalm: the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The leaders know He's told this parable against them, and they want to arrest Him immediately. But they're afraid of the people.

Round two: they send spies who pretend to be sincere. They flatter Him first: Teacher, we know You speak and teach what is right, and You don't show favoritism. Then the trap: "Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

If Jesus says yes, the crowds will see Him as a Roman sympathizer. If He says no, the Romans can arrest Him as a rebel. Jesus sees right through it. Show Me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it? Caesar's, they answer.

Jesus says, "Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." The coin has Caesar's image on it, so give it to him. But you have God's image on you. You were made in His image. Give yourself to Him.

They're unable to trap Him in front of the people, and astonished by His answer, they go silent.

Round three: some Sadducees come. The Sadducees were wealthy, powerful priests who accepted only the five books of Moses and didn't believe in the resurrection. They tell a ridiculous story. Moses wrote that if a man dies childless, his brother should marry the widow. Suppose there were seven brothers. The first marries and dies childless. The second marries the widow and dies, then the third, and so on, all seven. Finally the woman dies too. At the resurrection, whose wife will she be?

They're trying to make the idea of resurrection look ridiculous. Jesus answers that life in the age to come isn't just this life continued. People there won't marry, and they can't die anymore. They're like the angels, God's children, children of the resurrection.

Then He beats them using the only Scriptures they accept. At the burning bush, Moses calls the Lord "the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Not was. Is. Those men had been dead for centuries, but God is still their God. "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive."

Some teachers of the law, who believed in the resurrection and disliked the Sadducees, say, "Well said, teacher!" And no one dares ask Him any more questions.

Now Jesus asks a question of His own. Why do people say the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, in the book of Psalms, calls the Messiah "Lord." If David calls Him Lord, how can He be David's son? The answer the Gospels point to is that the Messiah is both: a descendant of David, and far greater than David.

The chapter ends with a warning. While all the people are listening, Jesus tells His disciples to beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes, love to be greeted with respect in public, and take the most important seats. They devour widows' houses and make lengthy prayers for show. Such people will be punished most severely. Keep that line about widows in mind. The next chapter starts with one.

KEY VERSE

He said to them, "Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Luke 20:25 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The religious leaders asked questions to trap Jesus, not to learn. How can you tell the difference between honest questions and trap questions, even in yourself?
2. If the coin belonged to Caesar because it had his image, what belongs to God because it bears His image?
3. Jesus said God "is not the God of the dead, but of the living." How does believing in the resurrection change how you see death?

CHAPTER 21

Two Coins and the End of the World

Luke 21

Jesus looks up and sees the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. Then He sees a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. They were the smallest coins in circulation, worth almost nothing.

Jesus says this poor widow has put in more than all the others. They gave out of their wealth. She, out of her poverty, put in all she had to live on.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Temple Treasury**
>
> The temple courts had collection boxes, often described as shaped like trumpets, where worshipers could drop in offerings. Metal coins clattering into them would have made noise, so a large gift might be heard by everyone nearby. Two tiny copper coins wouldn't have made much sound at all. No one else noticed her. Jesus did.

God doesn't measure gifts by the amount. He measures them by what they cost. The rich gave what they could easily spare. She gave everything. And right after Jesus warned about leaders who swallow up widows' houses, here is a widow giving her last coins to the

temple those leaders ran. Jesus sees her, and He sees the system that's crushing her.

Some of the disciples are talking about how the temple is decorated with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God. It really was spectacular. Herod the Great had spent decades rebuilding it, and parts of it shone with white stone and gold. But Jesus says the time is coming when not one stone will be left on another. Every one of them will be thrown down.

They ask the obvious question: When will these things happen, and what sign will show that they're about to take place? Jesus' answer is a sobering look at the future.

First, a warning: watch out that you aren't deceived. Many will come in His name, claiming to be Him, and saying the time is near. Don't follow them. When you hear of wars and uprisings, don't be frightened. Those things must happen first, but the end won't come right away.

There will be nations rising against nations, great earthquakes, famines, and plagues, and fearful events and great signs from heaven. But before all this, His followers will be arrested and persecuted. They'll be handed over to synagogues and prisons, brought before kings and governors, all because of His name. And He says this will be an opportunity: "And so you will bear testimony to me."

Don't worry ahead of time about how to defend yourselves, He tells them. He will give them words and wisdom that none of their opponents can resist. Even parents, brothers and sisters, relatives, and friends will betray some of them. Everyone will hate them

because of Him. “But not a hair of your head will perish.” Stand firm, and you will win life.

Then Jesus gets specific about Jerusalem. When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you’ll know its desolation is near. Let those in Judea flee to the mountains. This happened in AD 70. Roman armies besieged Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Early Christian writers say many believers in Jerusalem remembered Jesus’ warning and fled before the end.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **AD 70**
>
> In AD 66, the Jewish people revolted against Rome. Roman legions under the general Titus eventually surrounded Jerusalem, and in AD 70 they broke through the walls, burned the temple, and tore down much of the city. The Jewish historian Josephus described the horror of the siege in detail. Today, visitors to Jerusalem can still see huge stones from the temple complex lying where the Romans threw them down near the Western Wall.

Then Jesus looks beyond Jerusalem to the end of history. There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars, and nations will be in anguish. People will faint from terror. “At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” And then He says something surprising. When these things begin to take place, don’t hide. “Stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

For people who belong to Jesus, the end of the world isn’t the worst news. It’s the best news. It’s the day the King comes back to set everything right.

He gives them a picture: look at the fig tree. When it sprouts leaves, you know summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know the kingdom of God is near. “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

So be careful, He says, or your hearts will be weighed down with partying, drunkenness, and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. Be always on the watch, and pray.

Luke ends the chapter with a simple routine. Each day Jesus is teaching at the temple, and each evening He goes out to spend the night on the Mount of Olives. And all the people come early in the morning to hear Him at the temple.

KEY VERSE

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

Luke 21:33 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The widow gave almost nothing by the world's standards, and Jesus said it was more than everyone else. What does that tell you about what God values?
2. Jesus said hard times would be an opportunity to "bear testimony." How could a difficult situation in your life become a chance to show who Jesus is?
3. Jesus warned about hearts weighed down by partying and the anxieties of life. Which of those two is more of a danger for you?

CHAPTER 22

The Longest Night

Luke 22

Passover is approaching, and the chief priests and teachers of the law are looking for some way to get rid of Jesus. They're afraid of the crowds. Then they get a gift they never expected. "Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve." Judas goes to the leaders and offers to hand Jesus over when no crowd is around. They're delighted and agree to give him money.

Jesus sends Peter and John to prepare the Passover meal. When the hour comes, He reclines at the table with His apostles and says, I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. He takes a cup, gives thanks, and tells them to share it. Then He takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to them: "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." After supper, He takes the cup: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Passover**
>
> Passover celebrated the night God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. The angel of death passed over the houses marked with the blood of a lamb. Every year, families ate a meal of lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs, and drank cups of wine while retelling the story. Jesus took this ancient meal and gave it new meaning. He was the true Passover Lamb. His blood would mark a new covenant, a new rescue, not from Egypt but from sin and death.

Then Jesus says one of the people at this table will betray Him. They start asking each other who it could be. And then, incredibly, within minutes, the conversation turns into an argument about which of them is the greatest.

Jesus doesn't lose His temper. He explains that the kings of the Gentiles lord it over their people. "But you are not to be like that." The greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the leader like the one who serves. Who is greater, the one at the table or the one who serves? "But I am among you as one who serves."

Then He turns to Peter. "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat." But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.

Notice that. Jesus knew Peter was about to fail, and He'd already prayed for him. He tells Peter what to do after he comes back. Peter insists he's ready to go to prison and death. Jesus tells him that before the rooster crows today, he will deny three times that he knows Him.

They go out, as usual, to the Mount of Olives. Jesus tells them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." He goes a stone's throw away, kneels down, and prays, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."

In many Bibles, the next two verses describe an angel from heaven strengthening Him, and Jesus praying so earnestly in His anguish that His sweat was like drops of blood. The NIV includes these verses with a note that many early manuscripts don't have them. Whether or not Luke wrote those two verses, the scene is clear: Jesus was in agony, and He chose the Father's will anyway.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Luke 22:43–44**

Bible scholars carefully compare thousands of ancient copies of the New Testament. Some of the oldest and most reliable manuscripts of Luke include the verses about the angel and the bloody sweat, and some don't. That's why the NIV puts them in the text with a footnote. Christians have debated whether Luke wrote them or whether they were added early. No Christian belief depends on these two verses. The footnote is a sign of honesty, not a cover-up.

When He gets up from prayer, He finds the disciples asleep, "exhausted from sorrow." Luke, the doctor, gives them a little grace there. Jesus wakes them: Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray.

While He's still speaking, a crowd arrives, led by Judas. Judas approaches to kiss Him. Jesus asks, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" One of the disciples swings a sword and cuts off the right ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus says, "No more of this!" And He touches the man's ear and heals him. Only Luke, the doctor, tells us that. Even while being arrested, Jesus heals an enemy.

They arrest Jesus and take Him to the high priest's house. Peter follows at a distance. In the courtyard, people have kindled a fire and are sitting around it. Peter sits down with them.

A servant girl sees him in the firelight and says, This man was with Him. Peter denies it: I don't know Him. A little later someone else says, You're one of them too. Peter says, I'm not. About an hour later, another person insists, This fellow was with Him, for he is a Galilean. Peter says, Man, I don't know what you're talking about.

"Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter." Only Luke tells us about that look. Jesus was somewhere across the courtyard, and in that moment their eyes

met. Peter remembers what Jesus said, goes outside, and weeps bitterly.

That look was not hatred. Remember what Jesus had already said: I have prayed for you. When you have turned back. Peter's story isn't over.

The guards mock Jesus and beat Him. They blindfold Him and demand that He prophesy who hit Him. At daybreak, the council meets and asks Him if He is the Messiah. He says if He tells them, they won't believe. "But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God." They ask, Are You then the Son of God? He replies, "You say that I am." That's all they need.

KEY VERSE

Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.

Luke 22:42 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus prayed for Peter before Peter failed. How does it feel to know Jesus prays for His followers?
2. The disciples argued about greatness at the Last Supper. Why is it so easy to care about status even when something sacred is happening?
3. Imagine being Peter when Jesus looked at him. What do you think was in that look?

CHAPTER 23

Today in Paradise

Luke 23

The whole council brings Jesus to Pilate, the Roman governor, and starts accusing Him: He's subverting the nation, opposing paying taxes to Caesar, and claiming to be a king. Two of those three are lies. Remember what He said about giving to Caesar.

Pilate questions Him and then announces, "I find no basis for a charge against this man." But the crowd insists. When Pilate hears that Jesus is from Galilee, he sends Him to Herod, who rules Galilee and happens to be in Jerusalem.

Herod is thrilled. He's wanted to see Jesus for a long time, hoping to watch a miracle. He asks Him question after question. Jesus says nothing. The chief priests are there accusing Him loudly. Herod and his soldiers mock Him, dress Him in an elegant robe, and send Him back to Pilate. Luke adds a strange note: Herod and Pilate had been enemies, but that day they became friends. A common enemy can unite people who agree on nothing else.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pilate and Herod**

Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea from about AD 26 to 36. Ancient sources describe him as harsh and willing to use violence, and an inscription with his name was discovered in 1961 at Caesarea. Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, ruled Galilee under Roman approval. He's the Herod

> who had John the Baptist executed. Luke is the only Gospel that tells us Jesus was sent to him.

Pilate calls the leaders and the people together. He tells them he examined Jesus and found no basis for their charges, and neither did Herod. Jesus has done nothing deserving death. Pilate offers to punish Him and release Him.

But the whole crowd shouts, “Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!” Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city and for murder. Pilate wants to release Jesus and appeals to them again. They keep shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

For the third time, Pilate says, Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in Him no grounds for the death penalty. Three times, the Roman governor declares Jesus innocent. But the crowd’s shouts prevail. Pilate releases the man who was guilty of rebellion and murder and surrenders Jesus to their will.

A guilty man goes free. An innocent man takes his place. You can’t get a clearer picture of what the cross is about.

As the soldiers lead Him away, they grab a man named Simon from Cyrene, who’s coming in from the country, and make him carry the cross behind Jesus. A large crowd follows, including women who mourn and wail for Him. Jesus turns to them. “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.” Even on the way to His own execution, He’s thinking about the suffering coming to them.

Two other men, both criminals, are led out with Him to be executed. When they come to the place called the Skull, they crucify Him there, along with the criminals, one on His right and one on His left.

And then Jesus says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Some early manuscripts don’t include those words, but many do, and they fit everything Luke has shown us about Jesus. He told His followers to pray for those who mistreat them. Now He does it with nails in His hands.

The soldiers divide His clothes by casting lots. The people stand watching. The rulers sneer: He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One. The soldiers mock Him too. Above Him is a written notice: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

One of the criminals hanging there insults Him: Aren’t You the Messiah? Save Yourself and us!

But the other criminal rebukes him. Don’t you fear God, since you’re under the same sentence? We’re getting what our deeds deserve. “But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

This man has nothing. He can’t be baptized. He can’t go to church. He can’t do a single good deed or make up for anything he’s done. All he can do is turn his head and ask.

Jesus answers him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Today. Not after a waiting period. Not after he’s proved himself. Today.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Crucifixion**
>
> Crucifixion was a Roman method of execution designed to be as slow, painful, and public as possible. It was usually reserved for slaves, rebels, and the worst criminals. Victims could hang for hours or even days before dying, often from exhaustion and suffocation. Roman citizens were generally exempt. The

> cross was a symbol of total shame. That's what makes it astonishing that the first Christians chose it as the center of their message.

It's now about noon, and darkness comes over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stops shining. The curtain of the temple is torn in two. Jesus calls out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Having said this, He breathes His last.

In Luke, Jesus' last words are a prayer of trust. They come from Psalm 31, a prayer of someone handing his life over to God with complete trust.

The centurion, seeing what happened, praises God and says, "Surely this was a righteous man." The crowds go home beating their chests. And the women who had followed Him from Galilee stand at a distance, watching.

A member of the council named Joseph, from Arimathea, a good and upright man who had not agreed with their decision, goes to Pilate and asks for Jesus' body. He takes it down, wraps it in linen cloth, and places it in a tomb cut in the rock, where no one had yet been laid. The women from Galilee follow, see the tomb and how His body was laid in it, and go home to prepare spices and perfumes. Then they rest on the Sabbath, in obedience to the commandment.

KEY VERSE

Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Luke 23:43 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Pilate declared Jesus innocent three times and still handed Him over. Why do you think he gave in to the crowd?
2. Jesus prayed for the people crucifying Him. What would it take for you to forgive someone who hurt you badly?
3. The criminal on the cross had nothing to offer Jesus, and Jesus promised him paradise. What does that tell you about how salvation works?

CHAPTER 24

Burning Hearts

Luke 24

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women take the spices they've prepared and go to the tomb. They find the stone rolled away. They go in, but they don't find the body of the Lord Jesus.

While they're standing there confused, two men in clothes that gleam like lightning suddenly stand beside them. The women are terrified and bow down with their faces to the ground. The men ask, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Then: "He is not here; he has risen! Remember how He told you, while He was still with you in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered over, crucified, and on the third day be raised again?

Then the women remember His words.

They go back and tell all of this to the Eleven and everyone else. Luke names them: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others with them. These are some of the same women Luke introduced back in chapter 8. They followed Jesus in Galilee, they stood near the cross, they watched where He was buried, and now they're the first to hear that He's alive.

The apostles' response? They don't believe the women, "because their words seemed to them like nonsense." Peter, though, gets up

and runs to the tomb. Bending over, he sees the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he goes away wondering what had happened.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Women as Witnesses**
>
> In the first-century world, the testimony of women was often treated as less reliable than that of men, and in some legal settings it wasn't accepted at all. If someone were inventing a story about the resurrection to convince people, they would not have made women the first witnesses. All four Gospels do. Many historians see that as a strong sign that the Gospel writers were reporting what actually happened, even when it was embarrassing.

That same day, two of Jesus' followers are walking to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. One of them is named Cleopas. They're talking about everything that happened. As they talk, Jesus Himself comes up and walks along with them, "but they were kept from recognizing him."

He asks what they're discussing. They stand still, their faces downcast. Cleopas says, Are You the only visitor to Jerusalem who doesn't know what's happened there in the last few days? "What things?" Jesus asks.

Notice that. Jesus lets them tell Him the story. They explain that Jesus of Nazareth was a prophet, powerful in word and deed, and that the chief priests and rulers handed Him over to be crucified. "But we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." Had hoped. Past tense. Their hope died on Friday.

They mention that some women found the tomb empty and saw angels who said He was alive. But they didn't see Him. They've heard the news and they still walk away in despair.

Then Jesus says, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" Didn't the Messiah have to suffer

these things and then enter His glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explains to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.

Imagine that Bible study. Seven miles of Jesus walking through the Old Testament, showing them how the whole story pointed to Him.

As they approach the village, Jesus acts as if He's going farther. But they urge Him to stay with them, because it's nearly evening. So He goes in. When He's at the table with them, He takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and begins to give it to them. "Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight."

They say to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

They get up immediately. Seven miles. At night. They don't care. They return to Jerusalem and find the Eleven and those with them, who are already saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two tell what happened on the road, and how Jesus was recognized when He broke the bread.

While they're still talking about this, Jesus Himself stands among them and says, "Peace be with you." They're startled and frightened. They think they're seeing a ghost. He asks why they're troubled and why doubts rise in their minds. Look at My hands and feet. It's I Myself! Touch Me and see. A ghost doesn't have flesh and bones.

They still can't believe it, because of joy and amazement. So He asks, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They give Him a piece of broiled fish, and He eats it in front of them.

Luke the investigator includes the fish for a reason. A ghost doesn't eat lunch. The resurrection wasn't a vision or a feeling. It was a real body that could be touched and could eat.

Then Jesus opens their minds so they can understand the Scriptures. Everything written about Him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms had to be fulfilled. The Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. "You are witnesses of these things." He tells them to stay in the city until they've been clothed with power from on high. That's the Holy Spirit, and that's exactly where Luke's second book, Acts, picks up.

He leads them out to the vicinity of Bethany, lifts up His hands, and blesses them. While He is blessing them, He leaves them and is taken up into heaven. They worship Him and return to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stay continually at the temple, praising God.

Luke's Gospel began in the temple with a priest who couldn't speak because he didn't believe. It ends in the temple with a crowd of witnesses who can't stop praising God, because now they do.

KEY VERSE

They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

Luke 24:32 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The two travelers had heard the news of the empty tomb and still walked away discouraged. What keeps people from believing even when they've heard the facts?
2. Jesus showed them how the whole Old Testament pointed to Him. Have you ever thought of the Bible as one big story about Jesus?
3. Luke started his book by promising "certainty." After reading the whole thing, what are you more certain about? What questions do you still have?

TRY THIS *Pick one Old Testament story you know (Noah, Abraham and Isaac, the Passover, David and Goliath). Ask someone you trust, or do some research, about how it points to Jesus.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through the whole Gospel of Luke. You've seen angels announce good news to shepherds, Jesus eat with tax collectors, touch lepers, raise a widow's son, tell stories about lost sheep and lost sons, call a short man down from a tree, forgive the men nailing Him to a cross, and walk beside two confused friends on the road home. Now the question Jesus asked His disciples is the question He asks you: "But what about you?... Who do you say I am?"

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and God is looking for you.

You weren't an accident. God created you to know Him, love Him, and live under His good rule. Remember the shepherd who left the ninety-nine to find one lost sheep? That's how God feels about people who have wandered away.

2 We've all wandered.

Some of us are like the younger son who ran off and wasted everything. Some of us are like the older brother who stayed home and was proud of it. Either way, we're far from the Father. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus paid it.

On the cross, Jesus, the only person who ever lived a perfect life, took our place. Even a criminal dying next to Him could see it: Jesus had done nothing wrong. Then He rose from the dead, proving His payment was accepted and death was beaten.

> *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* **Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

The tax collector in the temple had nothing to offer God. All he could say was, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Jesus said he went home right with God. The thief on the cross couldn't do a single good deed, and Jesus promised him paradise. Salvation isn't a checklist you complete. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Coming home means turning around.

The younger son "got up and went to his father." That's what repentance is: turning from running your own life and turning to God through Jesus as your Savior and King. And the Father doesn't wait with folded arms. He runs. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. Peter denied Jesus three times, and Jesus still restored him. It means you belong to Him now.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. The tax collector used seven. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus is Your Son, that He died on the cross in my place, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm coming home. Have mercy on me, a sinner, and forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Fill me with Your Holy Spirit and teach me to pray. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. When Zacchaeus met Jesus, everyone knew by dinnertime. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Luke straight through in a Bible, a chapter a day. Then read Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, and watch what the Holy Spirit does next.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized. The first followers of Jesus in Acts did it right away.

Talk to God every day. In Luke, Jesus prays before every big moment. If He needed time with the Father, so do we. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Luke wrote for someone who wanted to be sure. Keep investigating. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Ask hard questions. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because in Luke, the people who thought they had nothing to learn walked away empty. The ones who knew they were lost got found. Don't be the one standing outside the party.

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

Jesus, Luke 19:10 (NIV)