

# Luke's Gospel Through a Systematician's Lens

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The opening page of a Seminec reader in Systematic theology reads as follows:

What is most "systematic" about systematic theology is not merely that it arranges its material—say, the biblical data—in this or that orderly way (that much is true of all the theological disciplines) but rather that it consciously and explicitly insists on asking "Why." It asks for the Sufficient Reason, the Adequate Basis, The Fountain, never resting until it has found "Reason Enough." Why, for what reason, finally, is this or that Christian claim made? By saying that the systematician asks for the "why", I am not suggesting that he does not know what it is. On the contrary, because he does know, at least in principle, what that sufficient reason is, his asking is meant chiefly to ask it into clarity, into the full prominence it deserves. He cannot even settle for the explanation, "Why, because Scripture says so." He still persists and asks again, "And, why, in turn, does Scripture say so?" His job is done only when he has traced the reason back to The Source: namely, God's reconciling the world unto himself in Christ Jesus—in other words, the Gospel. The systematician's task is to "necessitate" Christ. (R.W. Bertram)

In this essay we propose to practice this paragraph as we read Luke's Gospel.

## **The Question of Christ's Necessity.**

At first the question of Christ's necessity sounds impious. "Of course, Christ is necessary," is our automatic response. "Without him there would be no Christian faith, no Christian gospel at all. No thoughtful Christian disputes that." But, why is Christ necessary? Put crassly from the other end: How much salvation is there to proclaim *apart from* any connection with Jesus of Nazareth? For example, is God merciful to sinners even apart from Jesus Christ? Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son on first reading could sound like that. And yet Luke himself makes clear throughout his Gospel that the "repentance and forgiveness of sins" which he is proclaiming is necessarily linked to the "name" of Jesus (24:27). The canticles recorded by Luke in the infancy narratives with which he starts his "orderly account" (chapter 1 and 2) leave no doubt that God's "remembering his mercy which he promised to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his posterity forever" (1:54, 72-73), is to be found in the son born of Mary, named Jesus. Simeon punctuates this Lukan overture about the linkage between Jesus and salvation with his own song after he had seen the Lord's Christ: "Now...mine eyes have seen thy salvation" (2:26, 29-30).

But *why* is Christ necessary for salvation according to Luke? What does Jesus Christ do to rescue people "from darkness and the shadow of death", as Zechariah describes un-salvation, and bring them into "salvation in the forgiveness of their sins through the tender mercy of our God" (1:77-79)? Does Jesus' mere presence down here on the ground with people effect salvation? No, Luke's Jesus encounters many folks without moving them to salvation. The fact is, Luke records that at Jesus' preaching

debut in Nazareth “when they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath” and tried to lynch him (4:28-29). Mere presence doesn’t do it, nor does mere proclamation.

Luke, like all the evangelists, proclaims Christ’s *death* as necessary for salvation. But here again, as the opening paragraph above indicates, we must persist in asking the why question. Why in Luke’s gospel is the *death* of Jesus necessary for his good news to be true? The necessity of a crucified Messiah is a tender question in Luke. On the one hand, he makes no clear statement, as do the other evangelist, that Jesus’ *death* is a ransom for the redemption of sinners (Mark 10:45), or that he is the Good Shepherd laying down his life for the sheep (John 10), or that his is “the blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28). Yet on the other hand he has almost double the number of “Passion predictions” when compared with Matthew and Mark. All but one of these are stylized into his formula, “It is necessary (one Greek word *dei*) for the Son of man to suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (9:22). And in his final chapter, his Easter chapter, the disciples are told three times “It was necessary that the Christ should suffer these things.”

Why *must* the Messiah’s be a suffering and crucified Messiah? Though the *must* is emphasized in Luke (9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7; 26:44), he never gives us an easy answer to the *why*. What is most vexing, he never necessarily links the suffering to the redemptive work. The last three of the “*must*” references above give the reader the impression that God’s own plan for getting his Messiah through to glory was to put him through the wringer of suffering. For those with eyes to see it, this plan can be culled from the OT. And even though forgiveness of sins is mentioned along with the last of these three post-

Easter “musts,” there is no “must” connection made between the two. Luke is not as explicit as John when the latter says that the “seed must fall into the ground and die” or else it will not bear fruit (12:24). As my colleague Robert Smith reminds me, “forgiveness of sins” is listed in 24:46-47 after the “must” of Jesus’ death. But it is listed as one of a series of musts: Everything about the Messiah written in the scriptures must be fulfilled: he must suffer, he must be raised, repentance and forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations. But no causal connection is apparent between them.

Why then did he have to die? Luke’s best initial answer seems to be that human sinners are just so hostile to God’s mercy mission that even God’s chosen people are dead-set against it. And that’s why he must die. Stephen’s long sermon presented by Luke in Acts 7 appears to be the prosecuting attorney’s summary speech to support this: “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you... They killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered” (Acts 7:51f).

If we stop for a moment to summarize, our first sortie to get an answer to the necessity question for Christ’s death results in an answer of historical necessity. He had to die because the people to whom he came at that time in history were the sort that killed mercy messiahs. If they had not been that sort of people, he would not have been crucified by them. But is that “reason enough”? From our own Christian intuition and from other N.T. writings we sense that historical necessity is not sufficient reason for the death of Christ. Is there not also a theological necessity for a crucified Messiah? Even if the Establishment of his day had been friendly toward him, don’t we need one who will die for us? Given the sort of un-salvation in which we are all stuck, unless a suffering and dying Messiah

enters our scene, there is no salvation for us, no matter what. Thus John's gospel makes it plain that unless this Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world (as victim), we will all die in our own sins; and even worse still, if after he has done it we then snub his efforts, not only won't we "see life, but the wrath of God rests upon us" (3:36).

Even though we drew a blank by asking Luke to draw connections as the other evangelists do, there are other avenues for asking Luke about the necessity of a crucified Messiah. One is the item of human need mentioned in the previous paragraph. From the data of human need, as Luke chronicles it, the necessity of a crucified Messiah resurfaces. Luke's material on human need can be grouped under two headings: the specter of the sinner's death and the deadly misuse of legal righteousness.

## **The Specter of the Sinner's Death**

Luke has two death episodes not recorded in the other gospels, the young man at Nain and the conversation with the thief on the cross. A possible third is the parable (also unique to Luke) of Lazarus and Dives.

1. The episode at Nain (*Gospel for 3 Pentecost*) is the death of an "innocent," a widowed mother's young boy. Tragedy, helpless, too young to die, senseless death—these are the responses the text elicits. The real victim is the mother. She is the object of Jesus' compassion. As a widow now bereft of her only son, she is left without any life-support system in her "men-only" economic and judicial society. Next week or next month they will be carrying her out to the cemetery, too. The phenomenon of death is bigger than she is. In order to be rescued from her own imminent death, she needs this death of her son reversed. And that is what Jesus does. He touches the casket, technically "defiling" himself with death, stops the funeral and finally

reverses it. "He gave him (back) to his mother" (7:11-17).

What about necessity here? The victims involved surely need a Messiah bigger than death. Is he bigger than death just because he is the only son of God, and of course God is bigger than death? From this text and the one preceding it, (Jesus healing the centurion's slave), we see the necessity of a powerful Messiah with "authority" over death. How does Jesus acquire such authority? Is it necessary for him to engage death itself and save the hapless human victims presented in Luke 7 by letting death kill him and in the process destroying death itself? Luke doesn't say it that way. But neither does he say, nor does any other N.T. writer, that Jesus has authority over death merely because he is the Son of You Know Who. Jesus' authority over death shows us where to probe further.

2. The episodes on the cross between Jesus and the repentant thief (*Gospel for Last Sunday of Pentecost*) gets considerably closer to our question, for it joins the death of a sinner with the death of Jesus, and the outcome is the salvation of that sinner.

In contrast to the Nain episode the victim here makes a theological interpretation of his own death. He designates it a "sentence of condemnation" from God "justly" imposed. He refutes his fellow thief's demands by saying, "we are receiving the due reward of our deeds" (23:40f). What does it take to save this guilty mortal (in contrast to the innocent victim of Nain)? What kind of Messiah is necessary for his salvation?

His fellow thief plainly thinks he needs a cross-less Messiah: "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us." The repentant thief, however, rebukes his colleague and recognizes Jesus as the Christ who is coming into his kingdom in, with, and under this very cross. Like the Roman soldier below, he attests Jesus'

innocence. But he at least says more, although Luke does not quote him saying as much as we would like to hear. He perceives crucifixion of this particular innocent not as contrary to kingship, but – dare we say it? – necessary. Does the thief already see what finally dawns on the disciples three days later where Jesus opens their eyes to the necessity of a crucified Messiah?

Here we have the death of an innocent Jesus alongside the death of a guilty thief, with the guilty one admitting his guilt (= repentance) and trusting that the death of the innocent one is not the tragic end of his kingdom, but its real beginning for the thief (= faith). It is no surprise to hear Luke's Gospel say again that repentant guilty sinners, who are also believing sinners, are the intended beneficiaries of Christ's kingdom. Throughout the gospel Jesus has associated with sinners. Here he fellowships with a sinner at the very end of his receiving God's "due rewards" for his deeds. When Jesus responds, "Today you will be with me in Paradise", the "today" focuses not only on what awaits the repentant criminal, but equally on what Jesus is accomplishing, namely, coming into his kingdom. "Today" Jesus is dying with sinners. Is he also dying for sinners? The thief never expresses his faith in those terms. But how far from that is he when he asks: "Jesus, remember me"? Luke does not make it crystal clear. But he does not disallow that the thief's repentance-plus-faith linkage with Jesus the crucified is his transfer from God's just condemnation to God's mercy-kingdom, from inescapable and justly deserved death to Paradise – and all of that "today".

3. The Lazarus and Dives parable (16:19-31; *Gospel for 19 Pentecost*) is, as George Hoyer likes to say, polysemous. It has many signals, multiple messages. The parable contrasts rich and poor, here and hereafter, repentance and non-repentance, Abraham's bosom and Hades, a messenger coming back from the dead

(Christ Himself?) and listening to Moses and the prophets. Its signals about death indicate that death is the end of the time of repentance, death is the transition moment to final and irrevocable judgment. Although the surface accent is on the folly of riches, Dives does better diagnosis than that in Hades and asserts that what his five living brothers need is repentance. Repentance is the admission of one's own need for a mercy Messiah (maybe even a crucified one). Its opposite is an even worse calamity than the exposure to death. Sinners are helpless against death, but God's mercy Messiah is not. Unrepentance is a malady even worse than death insofar as both the sinner and the Messiah have no authority over it. If sinners won't hear Moses and the prophets for repentance, they will not be moved by one coming back from the dead—whether that be Lazarus reporting the facts on the other side, or Jesus Himself returning with victory over their deaths by virtue of his own. Unrepentance then appears as a malady worse than death.

## **The Deadly Misuse of Legal Righteousness**

Luke's theme of repentance moves us right into his extensive materials on the need of the righteous for that same repentance. The key texts are all parables; the prodigal son, the Pharisee and the tax collector, and the Good Samaritan. The classic is the prodigal son; in Luke's introduction he signals Jesus' disdain (or is it dismay?) about "righteous persons who need no repentance" (15:7).

The parable of the prodigal (*Gospel for 4 Lent*) would be more accurately captioned if it were called the parable of the lost son. It is the third in a sequence of parables, (the other two are about a lost sheep and a lost coin). Better still would be to call it the parable of the lost *sons*, for when the parable

ends we see that the older son is more lost than his prodigal brother ever was. Just how bad is the bad news here?

That the younger brother needs mercy is clear. And that he receives it gratis from his father is equally clear. What's the human need of the older son? Initially we can appreciate his dismay at all the fuss the father is making for the returned renegade. Fact is, he's got a point. We can all empathize with the "good guy" who plays it straight. Who wouldn't think twice about joining the party to celebrate such a rascal's return?

But this is the opening diagnosis for the deadly disease that stalks the righteous brother. By objecting to the father's extending mercy to sinners he starts to expose how lost he really is. His own need for mercy is so bad that it is hidden from his eyes. Not only is he opposed to mercy for renegade brothers, but he rejects it for himself. He has never lived with his father on the basis of mercy, nor does he desire to. "These many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command." "Just deserts" is his commitment and he intends to stick to it. It has such a deadly grip on him that it might just keep him away from the kingdom banquet by his own choice.

But just suppose he got his just deserts. What would they be? What does he have rightly coming from the (heavenly) father for his years of obedient service, when that service generates his anger at the father's mercy? According to the commandments which he claims as his criterion, he has death coming. How so?

He is clearly breaking the two fundamental commandments. He is not loving the (heavenly) father, nor is he loving his brother. He has moral grounds for saying "not fair," but he uses this moral capital to be angry with the father and to refuse to go in. The "man under the law" uses the law's help to break the law. Since the only biblical alternative to love is hatred, the

righteous older son hates the father's mercy management of sinners and hates the brother who gets such undeserved mercy. And what are the just deserts according to God's law for god-haters and brother-haters? It is not mercy. Yet if there ever were ones who needed it, they do.

Yet this parable says that there is good news even for such big losers, such really lost big brothers. After he registers his "righteous" god-hatred and brother-hatred, his father comes out and "entreats" him. The good news in Jesus is God's offer to those clinging to their own righteousness: Let go and come join the festivities for forgiven sinners. Luke makes this parable a cartoon for the central issue at stake in Jesus' encounter with Judaism. His mercy call is: Turn around from where you are going, you obvious sinners and you folks who have real righteousness, you who are sinners contrary to the law and you who use it to do your sinning. The path of repentance for the obvious sinner coming from the far country was shorter than the path for the righteous sinner in the fields in sight of the farm house. Kid brother had to forsake his unrighteousness. Big brother had to forsake his righteousness. Did he do it? Typically the parable stops short at this point, for the story line jumps from the page over to the life of the reader. But if he did (if we do), then the father's final sentence is true about big brother as well: "It is fitting to make merry and be glad, for this brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found." Note the mention of death. Both righteous sinners and unrighteous sinners are in death. Whatever God's mercy mission in Jesus entails, it has to cope with their deaths in the process of saving them.

Renouncing righteousness in order to be justified sounds like a mighty queer formula. Yet that is the either-or throughout the gospels, and it is nowhere more vividly drawn than in another one of the Luke-only parables, the Pharisee and the tax

collector (*Gospel for 23 Pentecost*).

Luke opens with these words: "He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others." As the parable opens, there is no question that the Pharisee does have Torah righteousness. The eventual verdict on him, "not justified," arises from his trusting in his own righteousness. Just what is wrong with that? How necessary for him is a mercy Messiah?

Should not tax collectors, public traitors to the Jewish theocracy and sell-outs to pagan enemies of God, be despised? Well, yes and no. They are despicable, but...if Jesus is calling them his friends, as he does so vividly in the Zacchaeus story (another Luke-only episode), then maybe.... In language common to Lutherans we can say that the Pharisee is using his unquestioned moral righteousness for his own salvation, rather than putting it to use for the welfare of those who don't have it, say, tax collectors. By using his own righteousness for himself he is cheating the neighbor out of what God wants that neighbor to have. Remember what Jesus did with his personal righteousness. He did not cling to it as something to be hoarded, but emptied himself of it by bestowing it on those who were very short on righteousness— tax collectors and sinners.

Worse than that, even, the Pharisee is cheating God out of what God has claimed for himself, for instance, in the directly preceding text (18:7f): "Will not God vindicate (make righteous, justify) his elect who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you he will vindicate them speedily."

In making his plea for mercy the tax collector opts for precisely this route in order to "go down to his house justified." It is the only way. The other pray-er at the temple does not make it. He loses out on both counts, at the front of

the temple where he cheats God, and at the back of the temple (and down at his house) where he cheats his neighbor. Faith's righteousness trusts mercy and is free for works that benefit the neighbor "down at the house." Work's righteousness trusts the righteous works, despises both mercy and the neighbor, and loses out both at the temple and at home.

At one point Luke can say (and again it is only Luke) that tax collectors making repentant pleas for mercy are "justifying" God (vindicating, showing him to be right), while the Pharisees' opposite behavior reveals them to be "rejecting the purpose of God for themselves" (7:29f).

What kind of Messiah do mis-users of righteousness need? A crucified one? It would be easy to have Luke come out and simply say so, but he does not. One spot where he gets close is his presentation of the parable of the good Samaritan (10:26-37; *Gospel for 8 Pentecost*). Jesus is discussing with a Torah expert what it takes according to God's law to "inherit eternal life." After agreeing on the two love commandments, ("Do this, and you will live"), the Torah expert, "desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" Here again we have a candidate presenting the classical righteous sinner symptoms. What he needs is not instruction on who his neighbor is, whom he then ought to love. He needs rather to expose the killer he carries within him, his desire to justify himself. He needs to see that where he best fits in the parable is in the victim's role. He's half dead already, stripped of real resources for eternal life, and ironically thinks that knowing the law he has "eternal life" cinched.

What all sinners need—righteous and unrighteous ones—is a Good Samaritan to show mercy upon them. When Jesus calls righteous sinners to go and do likewise, the "likewise" is that of the prodigals and prostitutes. "Go and get yourself some mercy, if

there is any to be had. And it just so happens for your benefit that I am here as your Good Samaritan for precisely that purpose.”

Any explicit need for a crucified Messiah here? Not directly, but we see the signals in the transfer of biographies between victim and Samaritan (one’s negatives for the other’s positives). Just how much the Samaritan would have to repay on the return visit to make the rescue complete is not specified. But in any case, the mercy is not cheap. It costs him considerably.

Is that perhaps the upsetting question we have been sparring with all along? Is God’s mercy in Luke’s gospel “cheap”? What does it necessarily cost him? Elsewhere the N.T. is clear that it costs the very life of God to get the eternal life of God into sinners. How costly is mercy for God into sinners. How costly is mercy for God in Luke? Given the diagnosis of the sinner’s need as we have traced it above (needs real righteousness, caught in the death of mis-used righteousness, or the death of just deserts), we can see from the task description (to get such folks saved) that it is a costly job. Luke calls disciples to count the cost of cross-bearing (14:25-28). What signals are there for the necessary cost involved in Jesus’ own messianic sonship?

## **He Must Die. Why”**

The first time Luke mentions Jesus saying that he “must” suffer he records a three-fold statement of the disciples’ incomprehension: “They did not understand this saying; and it was concealed from them, for they could not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask him about this saying” (9:45). Is that not a clue? The final grounds for my un-comprehension about Messianic suffering and its necessity is the linkage between

Messiah and me. What kind of Messiah do I need? This incomprehension in the disciples lasts until after Easter, just as it does for general Judaism. Necessity of a suffering Messiah is the flip-side of repentance. If my biography is in truth under God's death sentence, then a death-conquering Messiah is necessary if I am to be saved at all. Whatever help Luke does give us for the problematic necessity of a crucified Messiah is concentrated in the last Easter chapter of his gospel.

The Easter angels give the message about the "must" of suffering to the women (*Gospel for Easter Sunday*). These women relay it to the apostles, but these remain incomprehending. Then Luke tucks in his own Emmaus episode (*Gospel for Easter Eve or Monday*) with Cleophas' self-pitying moan: "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel," but instead he was crucified. The dramatic punch-line at Emmaus is supplied by the Risen Lord himself. Cleophas' two clauses are not contraries, they are necessary corollaries. "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things in order to enter into his glory"—his position as Israel's mercy Messiah? Jesus' educational vehicle for moving his disciples to this perception is to open their minds to understand the Old Testament after the fact of Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Luke reports Jesus doing the same with the Jerusalem disciples later that same first Easter evening (*Gospel for Ascension*). At Emmaus he linked suffering and Messiahship to help them understand *his death*. Here in Jerusalem he goes one step farther and links suffering Messiahship with repentance and forgiveness of sins to help them understand *their need*. Even with no direct statement (without a crucified Messiah there would be no forgiveness of sins), he does show that the need of all for repentance and forgiveness of sins is faithfully met by God remembering his promises of mercy to Abraham and the fathers as he leads his Son through Good Friday to Easter Sunday evening.

For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, Luke's one recorded dialogue on the cross between Jesus and the criminal may say it all. That sinner is the first to perceive what the disciples still have not. Repentance is saying in truth the thief's speech: "we have the same sentence of condemnation from God; we are justly receiving the due rewards for our deeds." Unless a disciple, especially a righteous one, acknowledges himself in solidarity with that law-breaker, he will never comprehend a Messiah who is willingly in solidarity with criminals, receiving in his own body criminal justice. Only after that does the door open a crack for us to see that such messiahship is "necessary" for him to get us into his kingdom, for us to be with him in paradise.

## Conclusion

On the issue of "necessitating Christ" Luke is most clear on his diagnosing human bad news. He exposes the depth of sinners' problems as their being under God's judgment justly and thus unprotected from unrighteousness' companion, death. He is less explicit—to put it mildly—on how the full history of Jesus works to de-fuse death's dominion and to make justified disciples out of sinners. The episode of the thief on the cross and the post-Easter incidents come close to making the bridge between malady and the full Christology of Good Friday and Easter. Consequently, the preacher or Bible student working through Luke in the coming church year may occasionally have to do what Melancthon proposes for evangelical hermeneutics: where a fuller gospel is needed to meet the fuller bad news "it is necessary to add the Gospel promise, that for Christ's sake sins are forgiven" (Tappert, 144:257).

Compared with Matthew and John, Luke's gospel is almost deliberately restrained on this "necessity." Perhaps the

exegetical articles in this issue will shed some light on why Luke presents the work of Christ this way. Could this possibly be part of the reason why the church's old line standard pericopic tradition took almost all its lections from Matthew and John? Admittedly, Luke's gospel is only one-half of his two-volume work. Acts, I think, does more to link a fuller—and more scandalous—gospel to the already frightening diagnosis of human sinfulness. Yet even there, although Paul is the chief human actor, his sermons in Acts sound more like Luke than they do like the Paul who wrote the epistles.

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