**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Paul’s Cherished Friendships (4): “Luke, The Beloved Physician”**

**Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16; Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11**

**September 17, 2023**

Of the many friends in Paul’s life, Luke’s friendship was one of the most enduring. For close to twenty years, he was a devoted and loyal follower of Paul, one whom the Apostle trusted implicitly and loved wholeheartedly.

Yet the Bible doesn’t tell us much about Luke. His name only appears three times in the entire New Testament. All three are in Paul’s later letters, and in all three he mentions that Luke was with him (Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11). There are also three extended passages in Acts, where Luke writes in the first-person plural (“we”), indicating his own personal involvement in Paul’s travels (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16).

That’s not much to go on, but there are enough clues to tell us what we need to know about his character and the impact he had on the life and ministry of Paul. As we view these Scriptures as a whole, a beautiful portrait of Luke begins to emerge.

**A. His Birth.** We know that Luke was a Gentile by birth. When Paul writes to the Colossians from his first Roman imprisonment, he sends greetings from six men who were with him at that time; he names them in two groups of three. The first three were his only Jewish-Christian companions, which means that the next three were Gentile-Christians (including Luke). “*My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas . . . Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. Epaphras . . .sends greetings. Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings*” (Col. 4:10-14).

In the letter to Philemon, sent at the same time and to the same place as Colossians, greetings are sent from five of those six “fellow workers,” with Luke also numbered among the Gentile-Christians: “*Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do . . . Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers*” (Phil. 23-24). If Luke was a Gentile, then he has the honor of being the only non-Jewish author whose work appears in the Bible. In fact, according to the unanimous teaching of the early church, he was responsible for two of the most important books in the New Testament – the third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles – which make up close to 25% of the entire New Testament.

**B. His Education.** From Colossians 4:14 we also learn that Luke was trained as a physician. As in our day, that said as much about a person’s calling and character as it did his expertise and training. He not only had received a good education; he was devoted to helping people in need of his medical care. That may have been a major reason he decided to join the missionary team, namely, to be Paul’s personal physician. For the sake of the gospel, to which Paul was dedicated, Luke was prepared to give up the ambitions and opportunities that a man of his education and profession would have cherished. His self-sacrifice was at the core of his character.

**C. His Conversion.** There is no hint in Scripture that Luke was Paul’s convert (as many of Paul’s friends were). He may have converted to the Christian faith directly from heathenism, since he had not first converted to Judaism (Cf. Col. 4:10-14). Or he may have been one of the God-fearing Gentiles who was loosely attached to a Jewish synagogue, and who would already have some familiarity with the Old Testament Scriptures. Perhaps he heard about Christ from a Jewish convert returning from Pentecost (Acts 2), and then came to faith. If so, this would explain his readiness to participate in the gospel ministry that took place in Philippi, shortly after he joined the team: “*On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place for prayer. We sat down and began to speak to them*” (Acts 16:13).

**D. His Travels with Paul.** In the book of Acts, there are three so-called “we” sections. They begin in Acts 16:10; 20:5; and 27:1, where the *third* person account (“they” and “them”) gives way to the *first*-person account (“we” and “us”). These are the sections where Luke includes himself in recording the story of Paul’s missionary travels, without ever mentioning his name.

In the first “we” section (Acts 16:10-17), Luke joins Paul, Silas, and Timothy at Troas and then sails with them to Philippi (AD 50). Having just described Paul’s vision of the man from Macedonia (northern Greece), Luke’s report reads as follows: *After Paul had seen the vision,* ***we*** *got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called* ***us*** *to preach the gospel to them*” (16:10). Obviously, Luke witnessed all the events of the mission at Philippi

(vv. 11-40).

When the three other members of the team left Philippi, Luke appears to have been left behind (the “we” changes back to “they” in 17:1ff). It’s not until seven years later that he rejoins Paul and his companions when they return to Philippi on their way back to Jerusalem at the end of the third missionary journey (Acts 20:5ff). **Q.** What was Luke doing all this time? **A.** The obvious implication is that he remained there to provide pastoral support and encouragement to the newly formed Philippian church.

In the second “we” section (Acts 20:5-21:18), Luke sailed with Paul from Philippi back to Troas (20:5-12). Then he sailed with the missionary team to Caesarea (20:13-21:14), and then on to Jerusalem (21:15-18). During Paul’s two-year custody at Caesarea (between the second and third “we” passages), Luke was probably not far away. He would have been among Paul’s friends who were permitted “*to take care of his needs*” during that time (Acts 24:23). Imagine having a medical doctor as one of those friends!

Then Luke joined Paul at Caesarea and accompanied him on the long and hazardous voyage to Rome. Thus begins the third “we” section (Acts 27:1-28:16), where Luke tells the story of their shipwreck at Malta, wintering on that island, and then continuing by sea to the port of Puteoli and by land to Rome. There he remained with Paul during his two-year confinement under house arrest (Col. 4:10-14; Phil. 23-24).

**E. His Last Days with Paul.** No one knows for certain where Paul traveled after he was released from his two-year house arrest (Acts 28:30-31). But within several years, he was back in Rome and once again in prison, only this time awaiting his certain martyrdom (2 Tim. 4:6-8). As he wrote his final letter to Timothy and prepared for the end, he mentioned that “*only Luke is with me*” (4:11).

Those brief words of Paul are “freighted with significance,” writes one author, “When others did not wish to identify with Paul or deserted him for other reasons, Luke remained constantly at his side. He was the only one of the old group of companions left with Paul. He was Paul’s one link of communication with the outside world. Luke may have penned the letter to Timothy for Paul, who, according to tradition, was confined in the dark, Mamertine Prison. Surely Luke witnessed the execution of his dear friend and arranged for the burial of his body” (Hiebert, In Paul’s Shadow).

As we reflect on this Scriptural portrait of Luke, several noticeable features of his character can be easily seen. **First**, he had an affectionate and gentle disposition, which earned for him the apostle’s grateful designation, the “*beloved physician*” (Col. 4:14, NASB, ESV); only Timothy seems to have gotten a stronger hold on the heartstrings of Paul, as his “*beloved son*” (2 Tim. 1:2). **Second**, he was always willing to serve, but he studiously kept himself in the background. He never intruded upon the scenes that he described (the “we” passages), even when he played an active role in them. **Third,** he was a man of steadfast loyalty, remaining with Paul through good times and bad. That faithful loyalty also earned for him the grateful testimony of Paul, “*Only Luke is with me*” (AD 67/68).

But there’s something else which often goes unnoticed. During the later years with Paul, Luke was spending part of his time collecting information, which in due time he included in his Gospel and the earlier part of Acts. Together, they make up a valuable history of our Christian origins, covering a period of more than sixty years, from the conception and birth of John the Baptist to Paul’s first Roman imprisonment (Luke 1 – Acts 28). It takes more than a good education and literary skill to accomplish such a task; it takes a heart that is devoted to Christ and to the work of His kingdom.

As a result, we are indebted to Luke for some of our most beautiful and treasured passages concerning the life and teaching of our Savior. Without Luke’s Gospel, we would never have the annunciation of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, the songs of Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon, the overcrowded “inn” at Bethlehem, the angelic appearances to the shepherds and shepherds’ visit to the infant Savior. Nor would we have the parables of the Good Samaritan, the prodigal son, the rich man and Lazarus, and the Pharisee and the tax collector. Nor would we have the story of the healing of the ten lepers, Zacchaeus, the penitent thief on the cross, and how the faith of two disillusioned disciples was restored on the road to Emmaus.

Without part two of Luke’s Gospel (the book of Acts) – we would never know how the Christian faith spread from its roots in Judaism to a faith embraced by the Gentile world. The Apostle Paul is the real hero of that story, but in Acts we can view him through the eyes of another. Luke wrote without any dependance on Paul’s letters, yet his contribution to our understanding of Paul’s mission is truly beyond measure. For this, we are indebted to Luke as well.

But more than anything else, Luke was “with” Paul – not only physically but wholeheartedly in all the activities and hazards of the gospel ministry. In this sense, Luke is a supreme model for us to follow. Everybody needs somebody to be “with” them in this sense. That’s the kind of person we should want to have in our lives; it’s the kind of person we should want to be in others’ lives! Luke was a blessing to Paul, and we can be a blessing to others, if we have the same self-sacrificing heart as Luke, the “beloved physician.”