GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY

The Good News reveals that Jesus *does* rule, *Acts 21:1-14*

Although Luke only wrote two of the New Testament's books (Luke and Acts), his pair occupies as much space as Paul's thirteen letters. A good reason motivates the volume of Luke's writing – he wrote to affirm Theophilus' conviction about the Good News concerning Jesus (*Luke 1:1-4*). That purpose means Luke's writings offer insight into the meaning and application of the gospel, the Good News about Jesus' kingdom and rule. Despite beginning his writings by announcing his purpose, Luke ends his pair of books to Theophilus in a confusing, anticlimactic way – his second letter, the Acts of the Apostles, ends with Paul imprisoned in Rome awaiting trial (*Acts 28*). Luke leaves his readers with what might seem like an incomplete story.

This lesson concludes our survey of Luke's portrait of the Good News about Jesus in Luke and Acts by considering what his account of Paul's arrest, trials, and imprisonment in Rome reveals about Jesus' kingdom and rule.

Paul and Jesus

The Bible repeatedly depicts God as the sovereign ruler of everything (*cf. Isaiah 44:6-8*), but our experiences in the world often leave the impression that it is a lawless, uncontrolled place. That tension raises a question: "**What would it look like if God ruled as a king?"**

Luke opens his gospel by introducing Jesus as the answer to the question about God's rule.

- He wrote that God gave Jesus "the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end"[1] (*Luke 1:32-33*).
- He intensified his presentation of Jesus' royal identity by citing God's declaration of Jesus' divine identity (*Luke 3:22*): he possesses the right to rule "over the house of Jacob" and over the entirety of God's creation.
- Even though he points readers to Jesus as the embodiment of God's rule, Luke reveals that Jesus exercised his rule in ways that did not match expectations. For example:
    - Jesus' kingdom appeared without expected fanfare, and many missed its arrival (*Luke 17:20-21*).
    - Jesus ruled in unexpected ways; he did not "exercise lordship" but embraced selfless service (*Luke 22:24-27*).
    - Jesus did not 'stick around' to rule the kingdom his death and resurrection inaugurated but instead entrusted its rule to his apostles (*Acts 1:1-8*).

[1] All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

Luke's second letter, the Acts of the Apostles, illustrates Jesus' rule through its record of the apostles and early Christians' activities.

- The prominent place Luke gives Paul in the book of Acts offers insights into Jesus' rule.
    - Luke gives an understandably lengthy description of Paul's three missionary journeys (*Acts 13-20*), which he follows with a curiously long account of Paul's arrest and trials (*Acts 21-28*).
    - The placement of Paul's arrest and trials at the end of the book of Acts intensifies its strangeness because Luke closes his narrative with a seemingly incomplete story – Acts ends with Paul imprisoned in Rome awaiting trial before Caesar (*Acts 28*). Luke concludes the book without telling readers what happened to Paul or what happened to the growing hostility confronting the early church.
- Rather than offering readers an incomplete story, Luke's narration of Paul's trials reveals Jesus' rule by intentionally overlaying Jesus' story onto Paul's story.
    - Paul enters Luke's story as Saul, a man "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (*Acts 7:54-8:3; 9:1-2*). But after encountering Jesus while traveling to Damascus, Saul became Paul and began proclaiming the Good News about Jesus (*Acts 9:1-22*).
    - Luke's account reveals that Paul became more than just Jesus' disciple; **he became someone who acted like Jesus.** Notice how Luke overlaps Jesus and Paul:
        - Paul concluded his third missionary journey with a trip to Jerusalem despite being warned it would result in his suffering (*Acts 21:4, 10-12*). Paul, like Jesus, journeyed to Jerusalem even though he knew its outcome because, also like Jesus, he was committed to seeing "the will of the Lord be done" (*Acts 21:13-14; Luke 9:51; 22:42*).
        - While sailing to Rome to be tried before Caesar, Paul's ship encountered a severe storm. Luke's record of Paul's calm instructions during the storm echoes Jesus' teachings to his disciples (*Acts 27:33-35; Luke 22:19*).
- Paul's intentional Christlikeness allowed Jesus to use him to witness to the Good News about his kingdom and rule "to the end of the earth" (*Acts 1:8; 28:30-31*).

Luke reveals a crucial insight into Jesus' rule through his account of Paul: **Jesus rules through individuals whose obedience to him shapes them into Christlike people.**

Applications

- Paul's story in Acts did not focus on him but instead illustrated the Good News of Jesus' kingdom and rule. Similarly, **your life's story revolves around Jesus, not you.**
- Because we revolve our lives around Jesus' kingdom and rule, **our goal is Christlikeness, not church planting, not obedience, not even heaven**. Those good things find appropriate expression only when we first and fully give our focus to Jesus.
- **Our growing Christlikeness provides the fruitful ground from which our efforts to share the Good News about Jesus will flourish.**

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Evening discussion

Luke composed his letters to Theophilus with a clearly stated purpose – he wrote to give Theophilus "certainty concerning the things [he had] been taught" (*Luke 1:1-4*). We can assume that Luke carefully deliberated what material to include in his two volumes and how to arrange them. **We can assume the books of Luke and Acts contain nothing accidental or incidental**. Given their intentionality, we should interpret the significance of Luke's writings not only by learning to discern the meaning of individual passages, but also by learning to see how a passage's relationship to other passages through its placement and literary connections contributes to its meaning.

Given our assumptions about Luke's intentional composition of his material in the book of Acts, how should we interpret the significance of Paul's arrest, trials, and imprisonment? Additionally, how can we apply that significance to our efforts to share the Good News about Jesus' kingdom and rule?

Discussion questions

In the morning sermon, we considered two ways Luke echoes Jesus' story in his record of Paul's arrest, trials, and imprisonment in the book of Acts. What other ways do you see Jesus' story replaying in Paul's arrest, trials, and imprisonment?

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We have not received a special commission from Jesus as Paul did. We commit to following Jesus within our existing lives, jobs, communities, and families. How do you think we can, like Paul, apply the template of Jesus' life to the preexisting patterns of our lives?

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A clear purpose shaped Jesus' life. Luke records Jesus' declaration of that purpose in Luke 4:43: *"I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose."* How do you think our efforts to become an increasingly Christlike church family will result in "the good news of the kingdom of God" being proclaimed in our community?

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Paul faced rejection, hostility, and abuse for his efforts to become like Jesus. While we might consider those consequences tragic, Peter wrote, *"to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps"* (*1 Peter 2:21*). Suffering becomes one way we become like Jesus. Given that example, what kinds of sufferings can we expect to encounter? Is it a blessing if we do not experience suffering?

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Paul focused his life on Jesus rather than on himself. We live in an individualistic culture that promotes selfishness. What practical steps do you think we can take to counteract our culture's influence? How can we assess whether we are learning to become a selfless church family (what signs might indicate growing selflessness in our lives)?

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