



Six Themes
Everyone Should Know

Luke

John T. Carroll

Geneva
Press

© 2018 Geneva Press

First edition

Published by Geneva Press
Louisville, Kentucky

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 —10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. Except where permission to photocopy is expressly granted on the material, no part of these materials may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information, address Geneva Press, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, Kentucky 40202-1396.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and used by permission. In some instances, adaptations have been made to a Scripture or a confession to make the language inclusive.

Excerpts from the *Book of Order* and *Book of Confessions* have been used throughout this resource. Both are reprinted with permission of the Office of the General Assembly.

Cover designer: Rebecca Kueber

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Carroll, John T., 1954- author.

Title: Six themes in Luke everyone should know / John T. Carroll.

Description: First [edition]. | Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2018. |

Series: Six themes everyone should know series

Identifiers: LCCN 2018036031 (print) | LCCN 2018037104 (ebook) | ISBN 9781611649253 (ebook) | ISBN 9781571532381 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Luke--Theology.

Classification: LCC BS2595.52 (ebook) | LCC BS2595.52 .C38 2018 (print) | DDC 226.4/06--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018036031>

Most Geneva Press books are available at special quantity discounts when purchased in bulk by corporations, organizations, and special-interest groups. For more information, please e-mail SpecialSales@GenevaPress.com.

Contents

Listing of <i>Six Themes Everyone Should Know</i> series	iv
Introduction to the <i>Six Themes Everyone Should Know</i> series	v
Introduction to <i>Luke</i>	vi
Biblical Backgrounds to Luke	vii
1. Joy to the World: An Old, Old Story Springs to New Life!	1
2. Promise and Provocation: Jesus' Inaugural Address	7
3. Comfort and Conflict: Radical Hospitality in the Reign of God.....	13
4. Give It All Up for Jesus? Poverty and Wealth in Luke.....	19
5. Engaging the Powers: Negotiating the Claims of God and Empire.....	27
6. Hope for Life: Exiting Luke's Story and Entering the World.....	33
Group Gatherings, by Eva Stimson	41
Group Gathering 1.....	43
Group Gathering 2.....	47
Group Gathering 3.....	50
Group Gathering 4.....	53
Group Gathering 5.....	57
Group Gathering 6.....	61
Glossary.....	65
Want to Know More?.....	67

Six Themes Everyone Should Know series

The Bible, by Barry Ensign-George

Genesis, by W. Eugene March

Matthew, by James E. Davison

Luke, by John T. Carroll

1 and 2 Timothy, by Thomas G. Long

Introduction to the *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* series

The *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* series focuses on the study of Scripture. Bible study is vital to the lives of churches. Churches need ways of studying Scripture that can fit a variety of contexts and group needs. *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* studies offer a central feature of church adult educational programs. Their flexibility and accessibility make it possible to have short-term studies that introduce biblical books and their main themes.

Six Themes Everyone Should Know consists of six chapters that introduce major biblical themes. At the core of each chapter is an introduction and three major sections. These sections relate to key dimensions of Bible study. These sections ask:

- What does this biblical theme mean?
- What is the meaning of this biblical theme for the life of faith?
- What does this biblical theme mean for the church at this point in history for action?

This format presents a compact and accessible way for people in various educational settings to gain knowledge about major themes in the biblical books; to experience the impact of what Scripture means for Christian devotion to God; and to consider ways Scripture can lead to new directions for the church in action.

Introduction to *Luke*

The Gospels are our accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Luke's Gospel begins with the story of the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. John went on to baptize in water those who would repent of their sins and receive forgiveness (Luke 3:3). This was accompanied by his proclamation of the coming Messiah who will baptize with "the Holy Spirit and with fire" (3:16). This coming Messiah was Jesus who brought the reign of God and in whom "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (3:6).

Luke is a gospel of inclusivity. As one scholar put it, "Perhaps the most marked characteristic of Luke's Gospel is its emphasis on the universality of the Christian faith. From beginning to end it is clear that in Christ 'there is neither Jew nor Greek' (Galatians 3:28)."¹ This emphasis is found throughout in Luke's concern for poor and marginalized persons in society. In Luke, Jesus "pronounces God's beatitude on the poor, the hungry, the mourners, and the excluded (6:20–23), and it is Luke's Jesus who offers to the poor, the maimed, the blind, and the lame places at the great banquet table."²

Many other themes are found throughout Luke. This study will introduce a number of these and explore their meanings—for Luke, and for us today in the church. Luke's Gospel features ever-widening circles of activity—throughout the life of Jesus. Many social and cultural "boundaries" are crossed in Luke's narrative of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

May your study of themes in Luke's Gospel instruct and inspire you. Be inspired to see "how Christians today are called to cross similar boundaries, and to explore ways to express and incarnate their faith in the various cultures of the world."³

1. Donald G. Miller, *Luke*, The Layman's Bible Commentary (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1959), 10.
2. Fred B. Craddock, "Luke," in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 1410.
3. Justo L. González, *Luke*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 5.

Biblical Backgrounds to Luke

Author and Date

“First Christian historian, gifted storyteller, literary artist, and theologian: such is Luke’s impressive résumé. . . . Alone among Christian authors, he narrates the extension of Jesus’ ministry in a world-encompassing mission of his followers (Acts of the Apostles [Acts 1:1]).”

“Like the other NT Gospels, the one associated with Luke does not name its author. The earliest extant identifications of Luke as the author of this Gospel stem from the late second century C.E.”

—John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 1.

Composition

“The writing and initial dissemination of Luke’s Gospel are typically placed in the period 75–95 C.E. This is a possible but by no means secure date.” Due to a variety of factors, “Luke’s composition can be fixed sometime between 75 and 125.”

—Carroll, *Luke*, 4.

“Luke’s deep engagement with the OT signals that the task of community definition, identity formation, and legitimation that he has undertaken in this two-volume historical narrative concerns the place of Christian groups in the Roman world, to be sure, but even more their place in the ongoing story of God’s people Israel.”

—Carroll, *Luke*, 3.

Importance

“Luke offers his two-volume history as an account of the next, and decisive, stage in the history of Israel. . . . The world-encompassing claims of the narrative begin there. The story Luke tells therefore

commences not with Jesus, or John the Baptizer, but with the ancient promises of a faithful God to the people Israel (a prominent theme in Luke 1-2).”

—Carroll, *Luke*, 5.

With celebration and joy, Luke prepares readers for the story of fulfilled promises and long-awaited salvation.

Chapter 1

Joy to the World: An Old, Old Story Springs to New Life!

Scripture

Luke 1:46–55 Mary’s Song (the Magnificat) celebrates the activity of God the Savior, who specially honors and favors the lowly and needy—like Mary herself!

Luke 1:68–79 The aging priest Zechariah offers a hymn of praise to God, who is acting to deliver God’s people in fulfillment of promises given to Israel long ago.

Luke 2:25–38 The prophets Simeon and Anna reveal the significance of the world-changing events that are underway: God is bringing liberation and hope to Israel, and to all peoples!

Prayer

God our Savior, into dark and difficult places of life you come with grace and light. Help us see and hear signs of your presence. Where there is discouragement and where dreams have been shattered, rekindle hope. God of ancient promises, you surprise us still with your loving, saving presence, meeting us in ways, people, and places we least expect. Give us strong hope so we may live lives of faith and faithful service, even when life’s challenges seem overwhelming. For you are our Savior, a very present help in trouble. We thank and praise you in the name of the one who comes to our world as the Prince of Peace. Amen.

Introduction

The first two chapters of Luke's Gospel locate readers in an old, old story—the story of God and God's people Israel. These chapters strike the chords of joy and hope—even amid the deepest discouragement and hardship. When God's promises seem to have been long forgotten, God acts anew. Plans are underway for the coming of a prophet (John the Baptizer)—a special leader who will call the people to reorder life to align with the purposes of God, and who will prepare the people for the arrival of the Messiah and Savior (Jesus). The time of salvation, of fulfilled promises, is here!

So, these chapters of Luke are filled with expressions of celebration and joy. But there will be surprises along the way. In a culture where men's voices are dominant, the first prophets whose voices we hear are two women, Elizabeth (who will be the mother of John the Baptizer) and Mary (who will be the mother of Jesus). We learn from them, and from John's father, the aging priest Zechariah, that the salvation God is bringing to Israel has more to do with restoration and forgiveness than with defeat of political and military enemies (in both Jesus' and Luke's time, this was the Roman Empire). Moreover, the deliverance God is bringing also means stunning reversals: the privileged and powerful will be dethroned, and the disadvantaged and powerless will be lifted up. And there is more: this message of light and hope will reach all people, including Gentiles (non-Jews).

These chapters celebrate the arrival of a long-awaited time, and we listen as voices of hope point us to the coming of a Savior-king. He first experiences the world as a sign of what lies ahead—a place for animals' feeding troughs and shepherds who, though social outsiders and low in status, are attuned to the heavenly chorus.

A Basic Theme: God Brings Salvation to a Longing, Hurting World

God's covenant people Israel is a people of both memory and hope. Luke begins the Gospel story by rooting the lives and ministries of the baptizing prophet John and the Messiah-Savior Jesus in the ancient story of Israel. God has promised to bring blessing to the people of Abraham—and through their descendants to extend blessing to all families of the earth (Genesis 22:18). God has also promised that a just ruler descended

from King David will continually exercise authority in the land (2 Samuel 7:12–16).

In the time of Jesus (as well as the time of Luke), though, words about promise and blessing and hope were fragile. The reality was clear: The Roman Empire had control—and there was no end in sight to its occupation of the land. How are we to make sense of this dissonance between what God had promised and what we see in the world? John and Jesus were born into a people who had a long memory and fervent hope—and both memory and hope are needed if the perils, defeats, and discouragement of the present are to be faced with courage and persevering faith.

Into a landscape dotted with dashed hopes, God sends a Savior. The world is turning. The opening chapters of Luke’s Gospel announce a dramatic change in the fortunes of God’s people. An aging, childless couple receive news too good to be true: they will have a son, whom they are to name John. He will play a special role, preparing the way for the coming of a Savior-king. In quick succession:

- the young woman Mary, fresh from heaven’s stunning news that she will give birth to a holy Son of God who will take the throne as a descendant of David, praises God, who remembers covenant promise and honors the lowly and needy
- the priest Zechariah celebrates the liberation God is bringing to Israel through his son (John) and through the Messiah
- shepherds learn from a heavenly chorus that a Messiah-Savior has been born
- the Holy Spirit prompts Simeon, as he holds the infant Jesus in his arms, to celebrate the arrival of salvation and to preview the surprising course that salvation will take—honor for Israel but also light to instruct outsiders (Gentiles), and a divine offer that will be both embraced and resisted.

The Life of Faith: Nourished by Memory, Energized by Hope

One of the governing convictions that underlies Luke’s story is the belief that God is faithful. Even when our experience of life reveals a different lesson, the long history of God’s people with their God has tutored them to place their confidence in a trustworthy God. Luke’s narrative opening scores this point by placing the story—and its readers—in that age-old story. The characters we meet in

chapters 1 and 2 call to memory women and men of faith in Israel's ancient story. So, Elizabeth and Mary remind us of Sarah (wife of Abraham), Hannah (mother of the prophet and king-maker Samuel), and so on. It is striking that Mary's Song so clearly echoes lines from Hannah's song-prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1–10. Luke aims to immerse readers in the ongoing story of the people of God, who are called to worship and serve a faithful God.

To be sure, before Luke's two-volume narrative (Luke and Acts) is over, God's promise and purpose to bring salvation will have reached far beyond the borders of the Jewish homeland, people, and religion, drawing Samaritans and Gentiles (non-Jews) into the people of God and extending the message of God's reign all the way to Rome, the center of the empire. This grand story, in Luke's telling, is the fulfillment of the ancient story of Israel—and of the promises and hopes it conveys to the entire world. So, memory—this sacred memory—is at the heart of Christian faith, too. We inherit this feature of the Jewish religion.

This sacred, nourishing, faith-and-identity-forming memory becomes even more crucial when lived experience is hard, when joy seems so fleeting, and hope so elusive. Why hope instead of moving from discouragement to despair? Why live by hope in the face of suffering and loss? As we will see again in chapter 6, Luke helps readers grasp the truth that God's joy does not immunize us against sorrow or difficulty. But it does take our losses and failures into itself. Suffering, hardship, and death are part of our experience, but they do not define us or our relation to God or one another, nor do they have the final say. God's sure gift of life is the final word. So even though, in the story ahead, the promise recalled, and the hope rekindled by the coming of a Savior will take a long and difficult detour, it is a journey in which God's steady, faithful presence and Spirit-empowerment are never left behind. Memory of God's faithfulness in times past teaches us this truth, even when our eyes and ears discern it only dimly.

The opening chapters of Luke's Gospel bind faith and hope together. They bridge our past as persons and as a people to the future that beckons, a future in which, as the apostle Paul affirmed in his letter to the Romans, nothing has power to separate us from the love of God known in Jesus Christ (Romans 8:31–39).

The Church: Joining the People of God in Bringing Blessing to All

Luke's Gospel opens by including its readers—in both the first and twenty-first centuries—in an ancient story, that of God's covenant people Israel. Every time the faith community gathers around the table for the Lord's Supper, it nourishes memory: “Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Corinthians 11:24). But that remembrance—memory of God's life-giving grace to the people of God—reaches back across the centuries to the very beginning. God has been faithful; God is faithful still. The church perseveres through tough times and daunting challenges because it lives by memory.

This sacred memory—and the joyful, confident hope it inspires, hope that rests on the faithfulness of God—binds the church to Israel's ancient story. The vocation of Israel becomes also the calling of the people who celebrate in Jesus the coming of a Savior.

How are we doing? In a world that continues to know poverty, hunger, war, conflict far and near, fear of others who are different from us, and paralysis from polarizing disagreements, what witness does the church bear to the God of Mary and of Zechariah and of Simeon? How might the Holy Spirit continue to speak to and through the people of God to restore hope in a world where hope seems so fragile, so elusive? Can your congregation model a way of being a beloved community that embraces difference of whatever kind? Perhaps the so-called “purple congregations,” which include members of divergent political and ideological positions, can seek to foster internal cohesion and welcome diverse others, as well as engage in effective action and witness in their communities. Of course, saying and doing nothing controversial (“that's political!”) may placate some among us, but at what cost in terms of fidelity to the bold, large vision of God's saving work in the world, as celebrated in Luke 1–2? The powerful, poetic passages of Luke's opening chapters challenge churches and persons of faith today to summon courage to speak a word to power when God's commitment to justice for all—especially those who are on the underside and outside—demands it. They urge us to engage in practices of outreach to the hungry and impoverished in our own neighborhoods and towns, advocating for access to quality

education, health care, and food. Can we—will we—find our place in this ongoing story of God’s saving work among God’s people, and all peoples?

For Reflection and Action

1. Find a time in your daily routine for silent mediation on the hymns of Luke 1 and 2. Begin in prayer that opens you to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Then, each day, read one of these hymns silently: Mary’s Song (1:46–55); Zechariah’s Prayer (1:68–79); Simeon’s Prayer-Oracle (2:27–35). Then read it aloud. Focus your thoughts on an image that claims your attention. Read it again a third time, either silently or aloud. Ask yourself how you will respond to or live from these Spirit-inspired words this day.
2. Mary’s Song has been called a “song of revolution.” How does it portray God? How might these words shape or redirect the practices and commitments of your community of faith?
3. As you think about your own context, which may include people of many diverse cultures and religious traditions, what difference does it make to acknowledge that the church is part of an old, old story, that of Israel?
4. What difference does it make for the worship and action of your faith community that this story gives the church a share in Israel’s vocation to bring blessing to all peoples? What concrete, practical shape might that blessing take in your setting?



Group Gatherings

Eva Stimson

Joy to the World: An Old, Old Story Springs to New Life!

Main Idea

Luke roots his Gospel in the ancient story of God's promise to Israel. The sacred memory of God's past faithfulness inspires joy and hope in the midst of a longing, hurting world. Through Jesus, God brings salvation to all people, including Gentiles (non-Jews). The powerful vision of Luke's opening chapters challenges the church to be part of God's saving work of bringing justice and blessing to all.

Preparing to Lead

- Read and reflect on chapter 1, "Joy to the World: An Old, Old Story Springs to New Life!"
- Review this plan for the group gathering and select the questions and activities that you will use.
- If you plan to sing one of the hymns suggested for the Conclusion, arrange to have an accompanist or a choir member lead the singing.
- What other questions, issues, or themes occur to you from your reflection?

Gathering

- Provide name tags and pens as people arrive.
- Provide simple refreshments; ask volunteers to bring refreshments for the next five gatherings.
- Agree on simple ground rules and organization (for example, time to begin and end; location for gatherings; welcoming of all points of view; confidentiality, and so on). Encourage participants to bring their study books and Bibles.

- Review the gathering format: Gathering, Opening Worship, Conversation, and Conclusion.

Opening Worship

Prayer (unison)

God our Savior, into the dark and difficult places of life you come with grace and light. Help us to see and hear signs of your presence. Where there is discouragement and where dreams have been shattered, rekindle hope. God of ancient promises, you surprise us still with your loving, saving presence, meeting us in ways, people, and places we least expect. Give us strong hope so that we may live lives of faith and faithful service, even when life's challenges seem overwhelming, for you are our Savior, a very present help in trouble. We thank and praise you! We pray in the name of the one who comes to our world as the Prince of Peace. Amen.

Prayerful, Reflective Reading

- Read Luke 1:46–55 aloud.
- Invite all to reflect for a few minutes in silence.
- After reflection time, invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and to reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Read the passage a third time, asking all to offer a silent prayer following the reading.
- Invite volunteers to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

Prayer

Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:

(spoken prayers may be offered)

Hear us now as we pray together, saying, Our Father . . .

Conversation

- Introduce Chapter 1, “Joy to the World: An Old, Old Story Springs to New Life!” Share observations, reflections, and insights.
- Review the Introduction (p. 2). Share these key points:

- a. Luke roots his Gospel in the ancient story of God’s promise to Israel, but he expands the story to include all people.
- b. In a culture where men’s voices are dominant, the first prophets whose voices we hear in Luke are two women: Elizabeth and Mary.
- c. God’s salvation brings stunning reversals: the privileged and powerful will be dethroned, and the disadvantaged and powerless will be lifted up.
- Review “A Basic Theme: God Brings Salvation to a Longing, Hurting World” (pp. 2–3). Form three groups. Assign each group one of the following passages: Luke 1:46–55; Luke 1:68–79; Luke 2:25–38. Have each group note and discuss: references in the passage to the “old, old story”; something new or surprising that God is doing; evidence of a world in need of salvation. Share highlights of the discussions.
- Review “The Life of Faith: Nourished by Memory, Energized by Hope” (pp. 3–4). Read aloud 1 Samuel 2:1–10 and have participants listen for similarities between Hannah’s song-prayer and Mary’s Song in Luke. Ask:

What echoes of Hannah’s song do you hear in Mary’s Song?

What are examples of similar language and themes?

How is God portrayed?

Why do you think Mary’s Song has been called a “song of revolution”?

How does “sacred memory” give us hope?

- Review “The Church: Joining the People of God in Bringing Blessing to All” (pp. 5–6). Divide into several groups and discuss what challenges the prayers/songs in the first two chapters of Luke present to today’s church and world. Ask:

What parts of this “good news” might be difficult for some to hear?

What actions might you and/or your faith community take in response to Luke’s message?

Conclusion

Read in unison Romans 8:31–39 as an expression of hope. Sing together a hymn based on Simeon’s Prayer-Oracle (Luke 2:27–35), “Lord, Bid Your Servant Go in Peace” (*Glory to God*, #545), or a hymn based on Mary’s Song, “My Soul Cries Out with a Joyful Shout” (#100).

Passing the Peace

The peace of Christ be with you.

And also with you.

Amen.