

Jesus: Friend of the desolate *

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IN LUKE'S ACCOUNT of the gospel, Jesus is born into a world of want. Almost without exception, the opening characters he introduces us to are people in need. Elizabeth is barren (1:7); Mary speaks of the hungry being filled (v. 53), Zacharias of Israel being saved from their enemies (v. 74); Anna is an elderly widow (2:37). From the very beginning, therefore, Jesus is portrayed as being familiar with those whose needs had not been met by the world they lived in.

Indeed, Jesus himself is depicted as no stranger to want, having only a cattle trough for a cradle (2:7), and a family unable to bring anything but the very poorest offering permitted by the Law (v. 24). The picture Luke paints is of the Lord's formative years being spent amongst people with none of the comforts of this life, and sometimes with nowhere to turn. These are people whose experiences those of us in the Western world, in much more affluent circumstances, may never have fully shared.

Recognising this characteristic of the third Gospel, it comes as no surprise that Luke highlights occasions when Jesus specifically seeks out those in great need. He does this in two ways. First, when describing events also recorded by the other Gospel writers, he uses words that emphasise the desperation of those concerned. Thus he tells us of a man "covered with leprosy" (5:12), the centurion's servant "about to die" (7:2), and the demoniac afflicted "for a long time" (8:27)—small but collectively significant details not given us by Matthew and Mark.

Secondly, there are events recorded only by Luke:

- The woman of Nain, described as "a widow", with an "only son", who was "weeping" (7:12,13);
- A sinful woman, also weeping (v. 38); an outcast who had perhaps never experienced the love she was able to express for her Lord;
- An imaginary man, "stripped", beaten and "half dead" (10:30; note the desperateness of his situation), avoided by priest and Levite, but befriended by a stranger promising, "whatever more you spend . . . I will repay" (v. 35), willing to pay whatever it cost to meet the man's needs;

- The infirm woman who "could not straighten up at all" (13:11), helped by Jesus when no one else could help;
- The three *lost* things of chapter 15: a sheep (v. 4), a coin (v. 8) and a son (v. 32); mentioned, no doubt, because the Lord had come "to seek and to save that which was lost" (19:10);
- A tax-collector with no sacrifice to offer for his sin, but who nevertheless went home forgiven (18:14);
- The women for whose coming troubles Jesus seemingly showed more concern than for his own more immediate suffering (23:28);
- The two disconsolate disciples on the way to Emmaus, whom the Lord made time for on the very day of his resurrection (24:13-32).

So this Gospel is filled from start to finish with people in need, and whose needs could be met only by the coming of the Saviour. Luke draws our attention even to instances in the natural world which would otherwise be overlooked, like the *extra* sparrow (12:6; cf. Mt. 10:29: 'buy four and get one free'), an insignificant creature which had cost nothing, but which was still remembered by God.

Luke steadily paints us a portrait of a man concerned for the lost and lonely, the forgotten and the rejects; actively seeking out the hopeless and helpless of the world in which he lived, and meeting their needs as no one else could. And for them all the experience was life-changing; witness the example of Zacchæus, the rich tax-collector, abounding in this world's goods, but who came to realise how impoverished he actually was by what he had once valued, and who forsook it so that the Lord could address a much more pressing need (19:9).

Luke's particular emphasis on this aspect of the Lord's work quickly becomes apparent. Small wonder, therefore, that Jesus' opening words of his teaching, as recorded by Luke, concern the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed (4:18); and that the theme of his first exhortation is the widow and the leper (vv. 25-27). These were the sort of people uppermost in the Lord's mind:

* Quotations from the NASB.



Traditional site of the curing of the Gadarene demoniac on the east side of Galilee. It is the only place where the hills are close enough to the shore for there to be a steep place for the herd of pigs to run down into the sea.

the sick (both literal and spiritual) for whom he had come as physician (5:31).

Perhaps this idea found particular resonance for Luke, “the beloved physician” of Colossians 4:14. Here would be a reason for Luke, himself a doctor, to notice first the gravity of these cases, utterly outside his own powers to help, and then also the greatness of the remedy.

Here are patients troubled in body and soul, completely beyond the help of any human doctor; people whom an ordinary healer would not even trouble himself with. Yet Luke records the work of a Saviour deliberately seeking out the apparently incurable that Luke and his fellow-doctors would not waste their time on. He sees a man—who himself knew what, and was

therefore able to “sympathise with our weaknesses” (Heb. 4:15) and was “acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3)—bringing to those he befriended healing and consolation in this life, and hope for life to come.

Let us allow this aspect of Jesus’ work which Luke emphasises to have its effect on us, for it surely contains a compelling motive force for us to “go and do the same” (10:37). May our response reflect the actions of Jesus, friend of the desolate, in making a difference to the lives of those in need, and may we too actively seek out those who have perhaps been passed by, that we might impart some comfort as we have opportunity. If we can do this, we shall truly have felt the reassuring touch of this man in our own hearts.

Whether the sinner was a woman of the streets, almost in despair at her wretchedness, or a father struggling with his unbelief, or Peter, beginning well and then ready to sink beneath the waves, they all found the arm of the Lord Jesus extended to save them and to lift them up into security and peace. The sincere sinner he never turned away—only those whose self-righteousness had already made them unable to repent.

John Mitchell, *The Pilgrimage of Jesus*, vol. 2, p. 144