

God's Salvation to the Ends of the Earth:

The Story of Luke-Acts

By Richie Temple

Cary, North Carolina

One of the chief focuses of this newsletter has always been to emphasize the continuity of God's plan of salvation throughout the Bible. Specifically, we have emphasized that in the Bible there is one God, one people of God and one hope of salvation for all of God's people. Though the background of this story-line can be seen in the Old Testament Scriptures themselves, the only sure method for correct biblical interpretation of these OT Scriptures is to allow the New Testament writers to be our guides in properly understanding them. For, as has often been stated, the Old Testament is the New Testament concealed and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed. It is only by focusing on the New Testament message of salvation - as accomplished through Christ - that we can see the whole Bible in proper perspective.

One of the best ways to do this is to follow the New Testament story of "God's salvation to the ends of the earth" in the two-volume work of Luke: the NT Books of Luke and Acts. These two books provide a continuous account of the NT fulfillment of the OT promise of salvation in Christ and then its proclamation to the ends of the earth. Let's look at Luke's own stated purpose for writing both Luke and Acts:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of things you have been taught (Luke 1:1-4).

Luke states clearly that his purpose in writing is to show the certainty of the things that had

been taught: i.e., the "word" concerning the fulfillment among them of God's OT promises of salvation to his people. One of the key OT sections, against which Luke frames his two-volume work, is the "servant of the Lord" passage of Isaiah 40-55. Luke understands these verses to foreshadow the salvation which is fulfilled in Jesus, the ideal Israel and the true "servant of the Lord." His account from beginning to end aims at the fulfillment and proclamation of "God's salvation to the ends of the earth." Isaiah 49:5-6 provide the central background passage for this theme:

*And now the LORD says –
he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
to bring Jacob back to him
and gather Israel to himself,
for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord
and my God is my strength –
He says:
"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring my salvation to the ends
of the earth"
(Isaiah 49:5-6).*

In short, this OT section of scripture provides the background for Luke's framework of his two-volume work about the announcement, fulfillment and proclamation of "God's salvation to the ends of the earth."

The continuity of this theme can best be seen by comparing the references in Luke and Acts about God's salvation in Christ that tie the two books together as one continuous whole. The Book of Luke begins by several announcements about the meaning and significance of the birth of Jesus, the Messiah. He is the "horn of **salvation**" (1:69) through whom comes "the **forgiveness of sins**" (1:77) and who will "**reign** over the house of Jacob **forever**" since his "**kingdom will never end**" (1:33). In short, this "**Savior ... Christ the Lord**" (2:11) embodies in himself the fulfillment of God's OT promises of salvation for all peoples of the world. As Simeon concluded in Luke chapter 2:

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace.

*For my eyes have seen **your salvation**, which you have prepared in the sight of all people,*

a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of your people Israel (Luke 2:29-32).

The rest of the Book of Luke goes on to announce and demonstrate “God’s salvation” in the ministry of Jesus the Messiah as well as to show its accomplishment through his life, death and resurrection. This, of course, sets the stage for its proclamation throughout the Book of Acts as can be seen in three sections of Scripture in Acts. First, chapter one begins by tying the two-volume work together.

*In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach, until the day he was taken up into heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about **the kingdom of God**. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.*

*So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore **the kingdom** to Israel?”*

*He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be **my witnesses** in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and **to the ends of the earth**” (Acts 1:1-8).*

It would be hard for Luke to be any clearer as to the purpose of the Book of Acts.

God’s Salvation

There are two sections of scripture that set forth in detail the message of salvation that was preached in the Book of Acts, and indeed, in the

entire New Testament from Pentecost onwards. First, Acts 2-4 with Peter and then Acts 13-14 with Paul. The two detailed accounts should be compared with each other but for the sake of space we will focus on the “good news” or “message of salvation” (Acts 13:26) which Paul preaches in Acts 13-14 on his first missionary journey. First, he speaks to the people of Antioch of Pisidia:

*“We tell you **the good news**: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm:*

*“‘You are my Son;
today I have become your
Father.’*

The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words:

*‘I will give you the holy and sure
Blessings promised to
David.’*

So it is stated elsewhere:

*“‘You will not let your Holy One see
decay.’*

“For when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.

*“Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that **through Jesus the forgiveness of sins** is proclaimed to you. **Through him everyone who believes is justified** from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you:*

“‘Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe.’”

As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear **the word of the Lord**. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying.

Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak **the word of God** to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of **eternal life**, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us:

*I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
That you may bring **salvation** to the ends of the earth.*

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored **the word of the Lord**; and all who were appointed to **eternal life** believed.

Then **the word of the Lord** spread through the whole region (Acts 13:32-49; cp. Acts 2 with Peter).

Shortly after this speech, Paul preached the word of the Lord to other parts of that same region including Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. After this he returned to each of the churches he established in those cities in order to strengthen them and to appoint elders to oversee them. Acts 14:21b-23 summarizes the message he taught them:

*Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to **remain to true to the faith**. We must go through many hardships to **enter the kingdom of God**” (Acts 14:21b-23).*

No better summary of the “good news” which Paul and the other apostles preached can be found in the entire NT. The teachings in the NT Letters to the churches should constantly be compared with these historical accounts in Luke-Acts so as to put them in their proper historical and conceptual context. In short, Paul’s message was “good news” about the fulfillment of the OT theme of salvation. It focused on Jesus the Savior, whom God had vindicated as Lord and Christ by raising him from the dead. Those who accept him in faith have the assurance of

forgiveness of sins, or justification, and eternal life¹ in the kingdom of God to come.

As can be seen from these verses, Luke-Acts gives us a complete picture of the biblical concept of salvation: *what* salvation is, *how* it is to be attained and *whom* it is for. “Salvation,” “eternal life” and “entering the kingdom of God” are all eschatological terms which speak of the same reality in regards to the biblical concept of salvation, but each are from a somewhat different perspective and with a different emphasis. In sum, we could summarize the whole message about “God’s salvation” in Luke-Acts with the following chart:

Whoever:
Jew or Gentile,
repents/believes/accepts
the good news/word of God/message of salvation
that:
Jesus is the (risen) Lord/Christ/Son of God,
will be saved:
that is,
be justified/receive eternal life/enter the kingdom
of God

In Luke-Acts the *basic* “good news” of salvation is always the same: those who accept Jesus as God’s Messiah will be saved. But from Pentecost onwards the message of salvation takes on a new perspective of *fulfillment*. The salvation that had been foretold in the OT has now been fulfilled in Jesus, for God has vindicated him as the Lord Christ by raising him from the dead. Everyone who accepts him as the (now risen) Lord, Christ, Son of God will be saved (cp. Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:9-17).

To the Ends of the Earth

In the Book of Acts, the believers’ mission is to take the good news of *this* salvation “to the ends of the earth.” Note carefully that this is the *same* salvation that was first foreshadowed in the Old

¹ It should always be remembered that the term “eternal life” literally means “life of the coming age.” As F.F. Bruce states, “ ‘eternal life’ (*zoe aionios*) reflects Heb. *Hayye ha olam habba*, ‘the life of the age to come’” (*The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Book of Acts*, p. 266, Eerdmans).

Testament; then preached to Israel; and finally, is preached to the ends of the earth. Simply put, there is *one* salvation in scripture that God accomplishes through our Lord Jesus Christ for all people; not different salvations for different peoples.

All of these truths are confirmed and established in the concluding chapter of the Book of Acts. Luke sets forth Paul as an example for all who would follow him in the mission of proclaiming the “good news”. Upon arriving in Rome – the center of the Roman empire – Paul met together with the Jews who were living there in order to explain the message of salvation that he had been proclaiming wherever he went:

*Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: “My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar – not that I had any charge to bring against my own people. For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is for **the hope of Israel** that I am bound with this chain.”*

They replied, “We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of the brothers who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect.”

*They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning until evening he explained and declared to them **the kingdom of God** and tried to convince them about **Jesus** from the Law of Moses and the Prophets. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement, “The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet:*

*“Go to this people and say,
You will be ever hearing but never
Understanding;
You will be ever seeing but never
perceiving.”
For this people’s heart has become
calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their
Eyes,
Hear with their ears
Understand with their hearts
And turn, and I would heal them.’*

*“Therefore I want you to know that **God’s salvation** has been sent to the Gentiles and they will listen!*

*For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached **the kingdom of God** and taught about **the Lord Jesus Christ** (Acts 28:17-31).*

In Paul’s final address in Acts he summarizes the “good news” that he proclaimed wherever he went. It is a message about the fulfillment of “God’s salvation”. This was foreshadowed in the OT Scriptures and has now been fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is in him that God’s ultimate plans for his people and creation are now proclaimed “to the ends of the earth.”

**