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LUKE
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**FOR EVERYONE
BIBLE STUDY GUIDES**

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LUKE

26 studies for individuals or groups

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with
Patty Pell



Published in the United States of America in 2011 by
InterVarsity Press, P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426

Published in Great Britain in 2011

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
36 Causton Street
London SW1P 4ST
www.spckpublishing.co.uk

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–281–06505–9

First printed in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press

Subsequently digitally printed in Great Britain

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

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GETTING THE MOST OUT OF LUKE

Imagine a village in ancient Palestine. They didn't have printed books or newspapers, television or radio. They had official storytellers. Some great event would happen: an earthquake, a battle or the visit of an emperor. Within a day or two the story would be told all round the village, and would settle into a regular form. Everyone would know the story, but some of the better storytellers in the village would be recognized by the others as the right people to tell it.

And that's what they'd do. They wouldn't change the story or modify it; if they did, people would notice and set them straight. So when Luke went round the villages of Palestine and Syria in the second half of the first century, listening to the stories told by the accredited storytellers—"the stewards of the word," as he calls them—he would know he was in touch with solid, reliable evidence that went right back to the early events. Plato had said, five hundred years earlier, that there was a danger in writing things down; human memories, he thought, were the best way to get things right and pass them on. In the century after Luke, one of the great Christian teachers declared that he preferred living testimony to writings. You can't tell where a book has come from, but you can look witnesses in the eye, and use your judgment about whether to trust them.

So, why is Luke writing it all down now? And who was Luke anyway? We actually don't know for certain who the author of this book was, but we call him "Luke" because that's who the church, from very early on, said had written this Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles too. He may

well have been the Luke whom Paul mentions as his companion (Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11). He could have been writing any time between A.D. 50 and 90. A fair guess is that the author is Luke, one of Paul's companions, and that he was writing in the 60s or 70s. Why write such a book now?

The main reason is that the message about Jesus has spread far and wide, way beyond the original communities in the regions Jesus himself visited. Peter, Paul and other missionaries had carried the message in all directions, and doubtless there were garbled, muddled and misleading reports circulating about who exactly Jesus was, what he did and said, and what had happened to him. Luke knows of other writings that have begun the task of putting it down on paper, but he has a wider audience in mind, an educated, intelligent, enquiring public.

A further reason, if indeed Luke is writing in the late 60s and 70s, would be the horrendous war that was raging in Palestine at the time. The Jews rebelled against the occupying Roman forces in 66, until finally, after a long siege, Jerusalem was destroyed in 70. The result was that many towns and villages where Jesus had been seen and known were decimated. Not only was the older generation dying out, but communities that had witnessed Jesus' activities were being dispersed or destroyed. The stories, which depended for transmission on a peaceful, stable society, were in danger of dying out. Unless steps were taken to write them down, the message would not be passed on to the next generation. And since Luke, like all the early Christians, believed that the things that had actually happened (what we would call the historical facts) had changed the course of the world, it was vital that they be presented as clearly and unambiguously as possible.

Luke thus constructs a grand doorway into his Gospel. He invites us to come in and make ourselves at home. Here we will find security, a solid basis for lasting faith.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDY

1. As you begin each study, pray that God will speak to you through his Word.

2. Read the introduction to the study and respond to the “Open” question that follows it. This is designed to help you get into the theme of the study.
3. Read and reread the Bible passage to be studied. Each study is designed to help you consider the meaning of the passage in its context. The commentary and questions in this guide are based on my own translation of each passage found in the companion volume to this guide in the For Everyone series on the New Testament (published by SPCK and Westminster John Knox).
4. Write your answers to the questions in a personal journal. Each study includes three types of questions: observation questions, which ask about the basic facts in the passage; interpretation questions, which delve into the meaning of the passage; and application questions, which help you discover the implications of the text for growing in Christ. Writing out your responses can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God’s Word.
5. Each session features selected comments from the For Everyone series. These notes provide further biblical and cultural background and contextual information. They are designed not to answer the questions for you but to help you along as you study the Bible for yourself. For even more reflections on each passage, you may wish to have on hand a copy of the companion volume from the For Everyone series as you work through this study guide.
6. Use the guidelines in the “Pray” section to focus on God, thanking him for what you have learned and praying about the applications that have come to mind.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUP MEMBERS

1. Come to the study prepared. Follow the suggestions for individual study mentioned above. You will find that careful preparation will greatly enrich your time spent in group discussion.
2. Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your group

will not be lecturing. Instead, she or he will be asking the questions found in this guide and encouraging the members of the group to discuss what they have learned.

3. Stick to the topic being discussed. These studies focus on a particular passage of Scripture. Only rarely should you refer to other portions of the Bible or outside sources. This allows for everyone to participate on equal ground and for in-depth study.
4. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they describe what they have learned. You may be surprised by their insights! Each question assumes a variety of answers. Many questions do not have “right” answers, particularly questions that aim at meaning or application. Instead the questions push us to explore the passage more thoroughly.

When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also.
6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time together, but also that as a result of the study you will find ways that you can take action individually and/or as a group.
7. It will be helpful for groups to follow a few basic guidelines. These guidelines, which you may wish to adapt to your situation, should be read at the beginning of the first session.
 - Anything said in the group is considered confidential and will not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.
 - We will provide time for each person present to talk if he or she feels comfortable doing so.

- We will talk about ourselves and our own situations, avoiding conversation about other people.
- We will listen attentively to each other.
- We will be very cautious about giving advice.

Additional suggestions for the group leader can be found at the back of the guide.

ANNOUNCING THE BIRTHS

Luke 1:1-38

One of the most visited exhibits in the famous Irish city of Dublin is the Book of Kells, the center of a special display in Trinity College. This wonderfully ornamented manuscript of the Gospels dates to around A.D. 800—considerably closer in time to the New Testament than to us today.

The people who arranged the exhibition don't let the public see the Gospels themselves straight away. Wisely, they lead you first past several other very old books, which prepare you step by step for the great treasure itself. By the time you reach the heart of the exhibition you have already thought your way back to the world of early Celtic Christianity, to the monks who spent years of their life painstakingly copying out parts of the Bible and lavishly decorating it. You are now ready to appreciate it properly.

Luke has done something similar in the opening of his Gospel. His story is of course principally about Jesus, but the name *Jesus* doesn't occur for the first thirty verses. Luke knows we will need to prepare our minds and hearts for this story. So he begins with the story of a devout couple going about their daily lives.

OPEN

Describe a time when someone asked you to do something that would be difficult or scary, but that you knew would also be good. What was your initial reaction to the request?

STUDY

1. *Read Luke 1:1-38.* Verses 1-4 form a prologue to the Gospel of Luke. What does the prologue tell us about Luke's purposes and methods?

2. We read of Gabriel's visit to Zechariah in verses 5-25. Describe Zechariah and Elizabeth. Who are they, and what is their life like before the angel visits?

3. The couple, well past childbearing age, are going to have a son at last, in a culture where childless women were mocked. The story would have reminded Jews of that day of Abraham and Sarah having a child in their old age (Genesis 21), Rachel bearing Jacob two sons after years of childlessness (Genesis 30 and 35), and particularly the births of Samson (Judges 13) and Samuel (1 Samuel 1).

What is Luke seeking to emphasize through the details he chooses to tell of Zechariah and Elizabeth's story?

4. Like all priests except the chief priests, who lived in Jerusalem itself, Zechariah would come in to the city when it was the turn of his division to perform the regular temple liturgy; he would stay in lodgings within the temple precincts, and then return home to continue his normal work as a teacher and leader in the local community.

How does Zechariah show a mixture of half-faith and devotion in his encounter with Gabriel?

5. Luke is careful not to dress up the story by making Zechariah a great hero of faith. Here we have an ordinary husband and wife receiving an extraordinary message from the angel and responding in mixed ways. What does this tell us about how God works?
6. How does the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth prepare us for the story of the conception and birth of Jesus?

Mary's story in verses 26-38 is told both by Luke and Matthew, in versions so different that they can hardly be dependent on one another; in other words, the story seems to have been widely known in the very early church, rather than being a fantasy invented several generations after the fact. People of Luke's day knew just as well as we do where babies come from, and Luke knew the reaction people

would have to this story. There would be little reason for Luke and Matthew to pass on such a story unless they had good reason to suppose it was true.

7. In what ways are the stories of Zechariah and Mary similar and different?

8. What is the political or royal meaning that Luke gives the event in verses 26-38?

In addition to Jesus being born a descendant of King David, a descendant who will be a king like David, other political references are made (verses 32-33). This coming king would be, in some sense, “God’s son” (see Psalm 89:27). As with a good deal of New Testament language about Jesus, this is both a theological claim and a huge political claim. It was theological in that Jesus is somehow identified with God in a unique way which people then and now find hard to grasp and believe. And it was political because “son of God” was a title commonly applied to Caesar in that day. So what is being said here is that Jesus is the true ruler of the world, not Caesar, and certainly not the powers of the world today.

9. What are the implications of the Holy Spirit coming upon Mary and the power of the Most High God overshadowing her?

10. Put all this together—the conception of a baby, the power of God, and the challenge to all human empires—and we can see why the story is so explosive. Perhaps some of the controversy about whether Mary could have conceived Jesus without a human father is because, deep down, we don't want to think that there might be a king who could claim this sort of origin and therefore this sort of absolute allegiance. How do people respond to a notion that there is one who deserves our absolute allegiance?

11. Think of something God has called you to—a task or a role, perhaps—in the last five years. How did you respond—more like Zechariah or more like Mary?

12. In the midst of the fulfillment of God's promises and purposes for the whole world, he also considers the needs, hopes and fears of ordinary people like Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary. How do you respond to this as you consider your own needs, hopes and fears?

PRAY

Begin with prayers of praise that God fulfills his purposes through ordinary people in the midst of their ordinary lives. Then, spend some time praying for the courage to respond to God's call like Mary with humility and acceptance.

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