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# Temple scenes in Luke's gospel

Luke 1:8 - 24:53

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## Luke's contributions to the New Testament

We owe much of the New Testament to Luke, the beloved physician and close co-worker of the apostle Paul (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11). As is well known, he is the only evangelist who wrote a long sequel to his gospel, namely the Acts of the Apostles (cf. Luke 1:1-4 with Acts 1:1). This second book is the link between the gospels and the rest of the New Testament, especially the letters of Paul. It shows us how the life and work of the Lord Jesus culminated in the life of the young church and the labors of the apostles.

Luke was also probably the only author of pagan origin (it is assumed that he was a converted Greek) who contributed to the New Testament. His gospel is also addressed to a converted Greek, Theophilus, i.e. "lover of God" or "friend of God". While Matthew addresses himself specifically to the Jews and presents Christ as the promised King of the Jews, Luke makes it clear to us that the grace of God, as manifested in the Man Christ Jesus, extends to all men. The coming and incarnation of Christ is proof that God has found pleasure in people, good will toward men (Luke 2:14). The universal nature of God's salvation is emphasized by Luke. In the book of Acts, we then see how the gospel is actually spread among the nations.

## Jerusalem and the Temple

The worldwide scope of Luke's message makes it all the more remarkable that he devotes so much attention to Jerusalem and the temple, the center of the Jewish religion. His gospel begins and ends with people in the temple. Zacharias was a priest and his wife Elizabeth was from the daughters of Aaron. Zacharias came into the temple to offer sacrifices (Luke 1:9). We also see Simeon and Anna here with the Child Jesus in the temple, and we find Him again as a twelve-year-old boy in the midst of the teachers in the temple (Luke 2:21f.). The climax of the temptation in the wilderness takes place here on the pinnacle of the temple (Luke 4:9).

Thus we find many "temple scenes" in this gospel, which concludes with the presence of the disciples in the temple after Christ's ascension (Luke 24:50-53). It is worth reflecting on these scenes and drawing from them the necessary lessons for ourselves. Incidentally, the interest that Luke shows in Jerusalem and in the temple he shares with John, the fourth evangelist, who was an acquaintance of the high priest (John 18:15). Jerusalem is the place of Christ's crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. It is the place of His "exit" from this world and His reception into heaven (Luke 9:31, 51). It is the place where the "temple of His body" was destroyed and raised up again in three days (John 2:19-22).

## The symbolic meaning of the temple

In this way, both evangelists describe the central events of the history of redemption that took place here, while John immediately alludes to an important symbolic meaning of the temple in Jerusalem. This house of God was a picture of another "dwelling place" of God, and that is the temple of Christ's body. For in Christ the whole fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily (Col. 1:19; 2:9).

Second, the temple was a type of the "body of Christ" in the present dispensation, namely the church that is a holy temple in the Lord and the dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:18-22). Third, under the old covenant, the tabernacle and the temple were a symbolic representation of the dwelling place of God Himself in the heavens (Heb. 8:1-2; 9:11, 24).

The scenes Luke outlines in and around the temple are also applicable to ourselves as "the house of God, which is the church of the living God" (1 Tim. 3:15). After all, the church is God's present temple in the Spirit, and its members approach as priests in God's holy presence (1 Pet. 2:5).

## A priestly people

In Luke 1 and 2, however, we see Israel as a priestly people par excellence. Here we are confronted with a faithful remnant, standing in the tradition of Malachi 3:16-17. It is a remnant that fears the Lord and seeks His face in His temple. Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, and others who expected the redemption of Jerusalem are its representatives. They are informed of the fulfillment of God's promises concerning the Messiah who would come. God reveals Himself to them and He shows them how He takes care of His people through the sending of John the Baptist – the forerunner, the herald of the King – and the King Himself, the promised Messiah from the line of David.

It is in the temple, in God's holy presence, that these things are made known, and this to a priestly people who appear before God. This contains a practical lesson for ourselves: we are to approach into the presence of God in the heavenly sanctuary in order to hear there more about the glory of Christ, Who has yet to return for us, and to see Him there with the eye of faith (cf. Heb. 10:19-22). How much simpler is this for us who live in the day of God's grace and who through Christ can always freely come to God, than it was for these believers from Israel who had to go to the temple in Jerusalem and were never allowed to freely enter the sanctuary itself!

## Summary

In summary, we find the following temple scenes in Luke and their practical application for ourselves in the present dispensation:

1. First scene: bringing an incense offering into the temple (Luke 1:5-23). Here we see the priest Zacharias in the temple at Jerusalem. As Christians, we may now perform priestly service before God and offer spiritual sacrifices in the heavenly sanctuary. Unlike Zacharias, we always have boldness to do so through the blood of Jesus (Luke 1:8f.; Heb. 10:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5). True worship is not limited by time or place (cf. John 4:23-24).
2. Second scene: Led by the Word and the Spirit of God we come into the temple (Luke 2:22-35). Christ was born of the virgin Mary, born under the law (Gal. 4:4). He was presented to God in the temple at Jerusalem in accordance with the precepts of the law. Simeon, who was filled with God's Spirit, came "by the Spirit into the temple" at that time. Believers now go like him led by God's Word and the Spirit into the temple, the house of God, to see Christ there. The

Holy Spirit brings us into God's presence and shows us the glories of Christ, even in His humiliation on earth (Luke 2:25f.; John 16:13-14).

3. Third scene: serving God continuously in the temple (Luke 2:36-38). Here we also see the prophetess Hannah in the temple. Like Hannah (or: Anna) we shall not depart from the temple. We shall live continually in the presence of God in order to serve Him, while at the same time we witness to others about Christ and speak about Him (Luke 2:36-38).
4. Fourth scene: Finding Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:40-52). Like Joseph and Mary, we may seek and find Christ "in the temple". He is still the great center of attraction for all who listen to Him and are initiated by Him into the things of the Father (Luke 2:49).
5. Fifth scene: a sacrifice for cleansing in the temple (Luke 5:12-16). As people who have been cleansed in principle and in practice from our "leprosy," the defilement of sin, we present ourselves to the great Priest over the house of God and bring a sacrifice of thanksgiving for our cleansing. In Luke 17 this scene repeats itself and it is ten leprosy men who are cleansed, but one of them is a Samaritan. The grace that has appeared in Christ has broken down the middle wall of division between Israel and the Gentiles, and ultimately nullifies the law of commandments and ordinances (Luke 17:14; Eph. 2:14-15; Heb. 10:21; cf. Lev. 14).
6. Sixth scene: going up to the temple to pray (Luke 18:9-14). The house of God is also now a place of prayer. But how do we pray: like the Pharisee or like the tax collector (Luke 18:11-13)?
7. Seventh scene: cleansing of the temple today (Luke 19:45-48). We humans are capable of making the house of God a "den of robbers" and thinking only of our own interests. For example, Israel once turned the worship of God into a service around the golden calf (Luke 19:45-46; cf. Ex. 32-33). Christ radically puts an end to such abuses, for judgment begins at the house of God (1 Pet. 4:17).
8. Eighth scene: teaching in the temple (Luke 20:1-8). God's house is not only a house of prayer, but also a place of teaching. This teaching is given to His people by Christ as the great, heavenly Teacher (Luke 19:46, 48; 20:1; 21:37-38; cf. Eph. 4:1-16).
9. Ninth scene: sacrifices in the temple (Luke 21:1-4). We appear in God's presence not only with offerings of praise and thanksgiving, but also with offerings of doing good and of sharing. In giving, God looks upon the heart,

even if, like the poor widow, we can only give two pieces of copper (Luke 21:1-4; Heb. 13:15-16).

10. Tenth scene: the passing of the temple (Luke 21:5-38). No stone of Herod's temple would be left on the other, despite all appearances (Luke 21:5-6). Thus, beautiful spiritual as well as literal edifices have been erected in Christendom, but can they stand in the day of judgment? We must distinguish between the house of God as built by men, and as built by God into a spiritual temple in the Lord (1 Cor. 3; Eph. 2). Ultimately, it is about the contrast between the great Babylon and the New Jerusalem. How do we build the "house of God"?
  11. Eleventh scene: the rent veil (Luke 23:44-49). After Christ died and accomplished the work of redemption, the veil of the temple house was torn in two (Luke 23:45). According to Matthew and Mark, it tore from top to bottom. God Himself thus put an end, so to speak, to Jewish worship as the way to approach Him.
  12. Twelfth scene: praise in the temple (Luke 24:52-53). We too may be continually "in the temple" to praise and glorify God, and that on the basis of the accomplished work of redemption and in the power of the Spirit poured out on His own by the exalted Lord (Luke 24:53; Acts 2).
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