

# LUKE 5

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## **Luke 5:1–11. Call of the First Disciples**

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 280–282.*

On the human side, Peter’s transformation springs out of these verses and into the reader’s consciousness. Peter’s conversion likely begins in the synagogue where the Savior teaches and heals (Luke 4:31–36) and receives reinforcement as Jesus heals both Peter’s mother-in-law and the afflicted in the crowd that appears at his door at the end of that Sabbath day (4:38–41). This conversion secures itself in Peter’s soul with Jesus’s unrecorded sermon and the huge haul of fish (5:3, 6–7). Its gripping power will not only weld him to the Savior but also, as readers know, anchor him to the ministry of the church through the rest of his life. And what we can say about Peter we can also say about anyone who responds to Jesus’s call. Already, Peter represents others, as he will throughout Luke’s two records.

Now, kneeling before Jesus in his own boat, Peter senses his own unworthiness—“I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8)—and thereby voices the sharply apparent need of all followers to lead lives of worthiness in order to enjoy the Savior’s influence. More than that—and Peter does not yet sense this dimension—Jesus’s gracious generosity in providing for the physical needs of Peter and his partners, and beyond them for those of their families, stands as a palpable example of how they should behave toward others. For Jesus knows that He is about to call the breadwinners away from their wives and children, so he graciously provides for their needs, both for sustenance and for income. The miracle of the fish is not merely for show. After all, to the modern church the Savior has said, “Wo be unto man that . . . wasteth flesh and hath no need” (Doctrine and Covenants 49:21). Instead, the miracle carries a noble and important purpose: the nourishing and sustaining of families. For, after the fishermen-disciples take their huge haul of fish to

be salted at the fish salting center in Magdala, about four and a half miles southwest of Capernaum on the lake shore, their families will have enough to eat and trade for more than two years. This nurturing care for the families of the Twelve is rephrased in words from modern scripture: “I, the Lord, give unto them [the Twelve] a promise that I will provide for their families” (Doctrine and Covenants 118:3). Thus, in an unexpected way Jesus brings families to stand at the center of His gracious actions.

On the divine side, the manifestation of power at the lake leads to a strikingly different path from other miracles and demonstrates an awe-inspiring reach. Heretofore, the Savior’s miracles have directly touched people’s afflictions, healing them of “diverse diseases” and invasive “devils” (Luke 4:40–41). In the miracle of the fish, Jesus’s powers dive into Peter’s inner soul, bringing it up wet and fresh and divinely cleansed. Moreover, in the same moment, Jesus’s powers also dive into the world of nature and thereby undrape for followers His ability to arouse and connect with the core of the natural world, as He does in the wilderness before matching wits with the devil (see Mark 1:13), an ability that He not only will display for His closest disciples when He calms the raging storm on the lake but will also hint at when He says that “the stones would immediately cry out” if His followers were to withhold their praise (Luke 8:22–25; 19:40).

Peter’s soul will never be the same. To be sure, he becomes a first-rank witness of the Savior’s miracle on the lake, a role that he continues to fill. But the experience changes him forever. Something deep within him snaps into place, forging an inner connection with the divine. He is a new person. At this moment, he cannot know where the future will lead him. But he must have grasped, at least imperfectly, that his future is with this man from Nazareth. Further, his inner experience, combined with the display of Jesus’s power over nature, demonstrates the truth sung about in the doxological hymn embedded in Doctrine and Covenants 88:6–13: “The light of Christ . . . [is] the power [of] . . . the earth . . . and the light which [ever] shineth [and] . . . is the same light that quickeneth your understandings.” Here power and illumination tie to the same divine source, the Christ.

Above these heavenly, silver-lined connections to power and celestial enlightenment soars redemption, which unexpectedly, lies in the waters of the lake, in “the deep” (Luke 5:4). Offering ringing praise to the future manifestations of the “arm of the Lord,” the prophet Isaiah sang, “Art thou not it . . . that hath made *the depths of the sea* a way for the ransomed to pass over? Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion” (Isaiah 51:9–11; emphasis added). Thus, in language that recalls the Exodus, that most famous act of redemption, the depths of the sea become the path through which the redeemed, freshly splashed with cleansing waters, come to their redemption. There is more. The depths of the earth also hold those who need redemption. The prophet Ezekiel, hearing a series of dire warnings against those who exalt themselves in this life, including Pharaoh, listens to the Lord’s voice: “Son of man, lament over the strength of Egypt, for the nations shall bring down her daughters dead to *the depth* of the earth, to them that go down to the pit” (Septuagint Ezekiel 32:18; emphasis added). Here the depth holds the dead, including “the uncircumcised” and “Pharaoh . . . and the multitude of his host” (Septuagint Ezekiel 31:18). These words, as those from Isaiah, tie firmly to the Exodus, which itself summons vivid

images of redemption. From that colossal experience, it is “the uncircumcised” and Egypt’s “daughters” who, banished to the depth, need redemption most from Jesus, who goes there (Romans 10:7; Ephesians 4:9–10). And from what we learn in modern revelation, redemption’s scouring, life-giving waters will surely come to those confined in death’s depths (see Doctrine and Covenants 138:27–35).

In a different light, Luke’s verses reveal for the first time the Savior’s exquisite sense of creating a symbol. He is more than an impressive preacher. He is more than a bright, verbal wordsmith who can capture a crowd with a turn of phrase. He miraculously provides a huge catch of fish for a few fishermen and then calls them to “catch men” (Luke 5:10). Whatever else these few fishermen have undergone in their lives—staying out all night in their boats in all types of weather, cleaning and testing their nets daily, relying on their time-tested skills to make a living for themselves and their families—their combined experience as fishermen will now be brought to bear in the quest for the souls of fellow humans. And they will be doing this in company with Jesus of Nazareth, whom they have known for only a few hours. But they have witnessed some of His divine abilities, and that is enough.

### **Luke 5:12–16. Healing a Leper**

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 285–287.*

Cleansing the leper brings a new, unexpected dimension to the miracles that Luke chooses to feature. For the Savior does not bring relief to someone with a mere temporary affliction but to a man with an evidently ongoing, permanent condition. The incident reveals Jesus’s broader power, a pattern that we shall see more of as Luke continues his record. The chief beneficiary, of course, is the sufferer. Not only has he dealt with this problem for a long time but he has also lived in an imposed quarantine, dwelling as a social and religious outcast from family and society. In his cleansing, Jesus broke through the barrier of avoiding contact with lepers and “touched him,” setting all straight again (Luke 5:13).

The next beneficiary of the cleansing is the Savior’s small band of disciples. They have now become His constant companions. From their point of view, each miracle, each sermon discloses more to them about this man from Nazareth. Their fellowship with Jesus becomes bedewed not only by an extraordinary comradery with an unusual man but also, just as importantly, with a highly charged learning environment.

The story of the leper also beams a bright, favorable light on the law of Moses. Earlier, Zacharias, Elisabeth, and Jesus’s parents showed respect for law, both religious and secular.<sup>1</sup> Now it is the Savior who shows His reverence for the strictures of the Mosaic law by sending the formerly unclean man to the priest (Luke 5:14). To be sure, a person can hold that Jesus simply does not want to shock the sensibilities of the man and his acquaintances by not requiring him to visit the priest, an act that some may have expected. And the sufferer may have gone to the priest on his own. But Jesus’s directive, especially when

combined with other positive assessments of the law (for example, “It is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail,” found in 16:17), illustrates His profound esteem for what His society has inherited from its past.

In a different vein, Jesus’s act of touching the afflicted man pulls up another dimension of His interaction with the Mosaic law. As another saying certifies, He respects and honors the law (Luke 16:16–17), but it does not exercise any claim on Him. Instead, His divine authority simply overpowers aspects of ritual uncleanness and dietary concerns, as this story and His suspension of food laws illustrate (10:7–8). In a word, He does not operate under the same restrictions that others do.

The Savior’s withdrawal at the end of the story for personal worship presents an important example to Luke’s readers. The incident points to Jesus’s intent to impose control on situations that develop rather than allow events and personalities to shape His ministry. We witnessed such efforts from Him in dealing with the devil’s temptations (Luke 4:1–13), and we shall see this dimension, for instance, in how He takes charge of the noisy mourning crowd in the home of Jairus before raising his daughter from the dead (8:51–54). After cleansing the leper, He purposely departs from His ministering to reestablish contact with His Father. This example cannot be lost on His newly called disciples. Here we see that Jesus maintains a balance between offering aid and instruction on the one hand and keeping his relationship with His Father fresh and open on the other.

Luke’s narration of this incident rests on Jesus’s reasons for seeking spiritual renewal after interacting with the multitudes (5:15–16). Whether intentional or not, Luke thereby passes on an essential element of the Savior’s ministry—that of regular personal worship, which goes authentically back to Jesus Himself and carries a firm historical tie to Jesus’s worship habits, as Mark also affirms (Mark 1:35). Hence, Luke offers to readers exactly what he learns about Jesus’s personal habits and actions.

## **Luke 5:17–26. Healing the Paralyzed Man**

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 293–294.*

Of those who have seen the Savior’s miracles or experienced their healing powers, only the recently called disciples are in a position to grasp that Jesus’s powers are running deeper and deeper. A reader, of course, senses that Jesus is pushing forward the boundaries of His kingdom and is pushing back the dimensions of this world that have held people bound, whether physically, spiritually, or socially. With each sermon and miraculous act, Jesus discloses more about who He is and more about His ministry of preaching “the gospel to the poor” and “deliverance to the captives” and of healing “the brokenhearted” (Luke 4:18).

Embedded within this broad view of His ministry lies the Savior’s evident purpose in healing and restoring health: He seeks to make the recipient whole. For example, in cleansing the leper, He not only

cures the disease but also brings the man back into his family and circle of friends (Luke 5:12–14). When healing the paralyzed man, He not only untwists and strengthens the man’s limbs but also restores his soul and opens the door to a normal life within his family, at the same time generously unburdening family members who have been caring for him (5:18–25).

But even as the Savior graciously beckons to hearers through both word and deed, an opposition begins to take root and reach out its menacing tentacles to pull Him down. For the first time, Luke identifies the seedbed of this opposition—those who identify themselves with the Pharisees and scribes. The resistance will grow and strengthen until it runs upon Jesus in Jerusalem and leads to His death. In the scene of the healing of the paralyzed man, opponents seem not to be organized (Luke 5:21). It is only after the healing of the man with the withered hand that opponents find one another and enter into a conspiracy, seeking “what they might do to Jesus” (6:11). But none of that is present when He heals the paralytic.

Tightly tied to the sacred character of the healing of the paralyzed man stands the Savior’s authority. He illuminates His divine authority in His declaration, “That ye may know that the Son of man hath power [Greek *exousia*, ‘authority’]” (5:24). At issue, of course, is His authority to forgive sins, for “Who can forgive sins, but God alone?” (5:21). Jesus must know that His initial statement, “Man, thy sins are forgiven thee” (5:20), will spark debate among some in the crowd. Therefore, He purposely draws them into their critique, and He purposely responded to the spoken and unspoken criticisms by drawing down the powers of heaven and healing the paralytic, answering again the questions posed by the devil about power and authority.

## **Luke 5:27–32. Levi**

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 298–299.*

Not only the call of Levi but also the response that it pulls up in some observers and then the Savior’s response aptly frame much of the Savior’s ministry. First, Luke offers a glimpse of how Jesus measures a person’s soul. Briefly, He looks at the person with discernment: He “saw a publican,” namely Levi (Luke 5:27), whose means of livelihood is despised, but as the verb “saw” shows, Jesus perceives his inner character. Second, Levi responds joyfully and seeks to share his newly found happiness with friends. Those friends are those whom Jesus can and will help. But others, not seeing what Jesus sees, find fault and reject both the Savior’s actions and His words. Even when Jesus explains His purpose of calling people to repentance, these individuals turn away and even rise up to oppose Him.

The most striking element in these verses is Levi’s response to the Savior’s call: “he left all” (Luke 5:28). The word translated as “all” (Greek *panta*) points not only to his total abandonment of his livelihood but also to his grasp of the utter finality of his action. Unlike Peter and his fellow fishermen, who

can take up fishing again, Levi enjoys no option to return to his former life. As a collector of tolls, Levi is under a contract to gather monies for governmental purposes. Breaking that contract means the end of his livelihood.

A second important feature has to do with Jesus's response to the grumbling Pharisees. In a scene that likely follows directly after Levi's feast, Jesus reveals the exalting purpose of His ministry: "They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31–32). Although questions have arisen about the authenticity of this saying, its genuineness is assured by its appearance, of all places, in the Book of Mormon. Interestingly, in this source the two parts of the saying are reversed. The context—a letter from Mormon to his son Moroni about not baptizing small children—offers a genuine saying of the Savior, as Mormon's introduction of the revealed words discloses: "Listen to the words of Christ, your Redeemer, your Lord and your God." Then follows the couplet: "I came into the world not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance; the whole need no physician, but they that are sick" (Moroni 8:8).

Upon examination, the two sayings joined here can stand independent of one another, each making sense by itself, and therefore there is no difference in which comes first. Hence, the order does not become a measure of authenticity. The version in Luke 5:31–32 possesses the same credibility as that which comes by direct revelation to Mormon.

In this connection, one intriguing aspect of the Savior's response to the complaining Pharisees needs dusting off—the fact that He responds on behalf of His disciples. One can observe, of course, that even in these early days of His ministry He is in charge and His disciples must be muting their words and actions in His presence. Hence, the voices of the disciples are entirely absent in this story. We hear only Jesus. What might this circumstance mean? In concert with other passages, such as the dinner conversation that opens chapter 14, Luke seems to be portraying Jesus as an irrepressible conversationalist who literally takes over discussions and meetings of which He is a part, including synagogue services.<sup>2</sup>

In a different vein, Levi seems to be one of the minor customs officials rather than a person who recruits others to this livelihood and supervises them. The observation that he is "sitting at the receipt of custom" (Luke 5:27), or at the toll station, points to this conclusion. Tolls are collected all across the Roman world, seemingly at every place that officials can think of, a point of annoyance to travelers. In the case of Levi and his fellows at the Capernaum toll station, whatever they collect likely goes to the coffers of Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, rather than to some other government treasury.

## **Luke 5:33–39. Early Teachings**

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 303–304.*

These verses present three teachings that share a common theme—the utter inadequacy of the old and therefore a sharp need for the new. Specifically, these teachings center on fasting, the new garment that is fastened to the old, and new wine in old bottles.<sup>3</sup> The Savior’s fresh message and unexpected activities begin to cut across old norms and customs. And people who treasure the old start to resist. Jesus’s words in part mold His response to His critics. Moreover, what He teaches is as much for His new, tiny group of disciples as it is for other hearers. His disciples are still in learning mode and will be for a long time.

This observation presumes that these teachings of Jesus come from Him early in His ministry. Both Mark and Matthew repeat them together and place them immediately after the calling of Levi (see Mark 2:13–22; Matthew 9:9–17). Moreover, the sayings deal with matters that naturally arise early on as the behavior patterns and announced intents of Jesus and His followers become publicly known. Hence, even though none of the Gospel writers offers hints about the place and exact timing of the sayings, they fit appropriately where they are, which fixes them as early utterances. If Jesus in fact speaks the sayings recorded in Luke 5:34–39 in a later setting rather than soon after he calls Levi, this observation does not diminish their validity or authenticity.

The three teachings and the portrayal of the Savior’s attitude toward sinners in the prior story (Luke 5:30–32) allow Luke, early in Jesus’s ministry, to uncover some of His important and distinctive characteristics that will bridge across the rest of His life. They also bring a refreshing approach that invites all to come to Him. Jesus obviously is willing to reach out to and associate with the despised outcasts of society; He plainly intends to offer merciful assistance to all; He clearly carries a new agenda that replaces the old; and He frequently frames His teaching in terms that are familiar and understandable to all His hearers. And there is more just beneath the surface.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Jesus still values elements from the old ways of worship. Fasting and prayer are staples in the patterns of Jewish worship. Such acts, which show a person’s devotion, confer regularity and bring order into one’s life before the Lord. Many prayers consist of memorized recitations, but others come from the heart, as do the prayers of both the Pharisee and the publican in Jesus’s story of temple worship (Luke 18:9–14).

Just as meals and the sharing of one’s table with others are often special, even sacred occasions, so abstaining from food and drink, frequently an act of mourning, also presents an opportunity for spiritual regeneration and for inviting God’s aid through the discipline of resisting the body’s appetites. To be sure, certain worshipers, the Pharisees among them, fast often, regularly “twice in the week” (5:33; 18:12). But for the moment Jesus does not impose this form of self-denial on His followers, though the days are coming when they will fast (5:35), a clear affirmation of its enduring value in His eyes.

## Notes

- 1 Luke 1:6; 2:1–5, 21–24, 27, 39, 42.
- 2 Luke 6:6–10; 7:36–50; 11:37–52; 13:10–17.
- 3 Luke 5:33–35, 36, 37–39.

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