

Dale Ralph Davis. *Luke 1–13 and Luke 14–22. Focus on the Bible. Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2021. 240pp. + 10pp. (back matter) + 13pp. (back matter); 240pp. + 12pp. (front matter) + 15pp. (back matter).*

I have long recommended Davis’s commentaries on the OT books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings; historical narrative is something of a specialty for him. (*The Word Became Fresh* is his excellent guide on how to preach historical narrative.) His work on Luke is of the same character and quality. His commentaries provide an enlightening and enjoyable way to work through any of those books. (I read straight through his two-volume Kings commentary last summer.) Most biblical commentaries tend to be technical resources written for reference. Davis’s commentaries, in contrast, are eminently readable texts.

As former professor of OT at Reformed Theological Seminary (Jackson, MS) with decades of pastoral experience to boot, Davis is on familiar terms with highbrow literature and donnish debates. Most of that, however, he confines to occasional footnotes, leaving the commentary itself an undistracted interpretation of the text, interwoven with illustration and application. Especially fond of historical and biographical illustrations, he has a particular penchant for baseball and the Civil War. He does not ramble or fill the page with fluff, devotional or otherwise. His focus throughout remains riveted on the text—an expositional commentary built solidly on a seasoned analysis of the exegetical details of the text. (If you’re wondering why an OT prof is writing a commentary on Luke, he explains that in the one-page preface.)

Davis does not think that Luke’s “orderly account” (1:3) necessarily implies that it is slavishly chronological but, rather, “a connected, coherent, and generally sequential account.” Zechariah’s answered prayer in 1:13 was clearly his long-since abandoned prayer for a child (1:21); and his muteness was both a chastisement and a merciful guarantee: “if the mute-threat is true, so is the child-promise!” (1:20). Davis gently chides commentators who explain away kingdom promises (like those in 1:32–33, 73–75) as merely metaphorical and spiritual, “whether one sees it occurring in some ‘millennial,’ earthly reign or in the new heavens and new earth” (1:27, 40–41). He rightly identifies the real gist of the miraculous births by both Sarah (Gen 18:14) and Mary (Luke 1:37); this core issue in both cases was not the ability of divine power but the certainty of the divine promise (1:21, 29).

Davis is selective about which bogs he wades into; even when he steers clear of some of the more technical scholarly textual disputes, his footnotes often weigh in at some length on such issues while the main text remains focused on the bigger issues (1:43, 79). He rejects the notion that “Abba” is merely “a little child’s term” for father “equivalent to ‘Daddy.’” It is a term of relational familiarity “commonly used within the family circle” by “adult children” as well (1:196). Davis spends two pages arguing that Luke’s reference to Jesus’ “set[ting] His face to go to Jerusalem” is more than “a mere literary idiom” to describe his resolve, or even a passing allusion to Isaiah 50:7. Rather, Luke wants his readers to connect this reference to the larger Servant Song context of Isaiah 50 and “the words of the ‘suffering servant’ there”—including not only his obedient resolve but also his confidence in Yahweh’s help (1:166–67).

Davis astutely identifies the New Covenant passage Ezekiel 36:23 as the biblical-theological context for the first petition of the Lord's model prayer: "Father, may your name be sanctified." Praying this, then, explicitly involves praying for the coming eschatological reality that will be the means for the international sanctification of God's name prophesied in Ezekiel 36—the conversion and "final restoration" of Israel "to the land." Indeed, "the parallel petition, 'Your kingdom come,' supports this view" (I:198). Davis recognizes a "wisp of humor" in Jesus' follow-up parabolic instruction regarding the friend at midnight (Luke 11:5–13). The interpretational fulcrum, he notes, lies in the word *anaideia* which, he concludes, does not refer to the knocker's "persistence" or the friend's "desire to avoid shame," but the knocker's "chutzpah" (Davis translates it "audacity"). Davis applies this to our willingness to bring even our most "embarrassing" requests to God, but he comes closer to the parable's central point when he suggests that "Jesus may well intend a how-much-more argument" here, as he "clearly" does in 11:11–13. The picture we are meant to carry away is the "contrast between the crabby friend" awakened at midnight and our "willing heavenly Father" (I:201–3). We are incurably suspicious of God; but "He doesn't analyze the grammar and requests in your prayers looking for loopholes in order to" give you something you didn't mean to ask for (I:204).

In the topically related parable of the unjust judge, Davis notes contrasts between God and the unjust judge (in attitude and character) as well as parallels (eventual justice, though delayed) (II:79–80). That parable on the necessity of persevering prayer (18:1) closes with a question: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find [literally] the faith upon earth?" (18:8). This is not a reference to whether the Christian faith will endure, nor whether there will be believers when Christ returns; rather, as Davis notes, "the faith that Jesus speaks of is the faith that shows itself in persevering prayer"—that is, Jesus says, "this kind of faith that I have just been talking about" that keeps praying to God even in the face of delay (II:81).

The rich young ruler's problem, Davis explains, was not with the second table of the law but with the first: "Jesus' demand was a test case . . . that exposed his *first commandment* problem. . . . He was an idolator; he had another God" (II:99–100). Davis insists that the "Son of Man" title in Daniel 7:13 is "an *individual* figure and that 'Son of Man' does not merely denote the corporate people of God" as some have tried to argue (II:153). He is also careful to note the distinction between the plural "you" in 22:31 (all the disciples will be "sifted") and the singular "you" in 22:32 (Jesus promises to pray for Peter specifically) (II:172).

Amid his comments on the last supper, Davis inserts a three-page excursus (II:165–68) on the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:31–34 that is, on the whole, quite helpful: "Contemporary Gentile believers must not assume that the covenant is all ours and that Israel has no more place in it. It is, strictly speaking, *their* covenant. We must not think that we can high-jack this covenant as our own—rather we piggyback on Israel's privileges in that covenant" (II:166). "The cup" of Jesus' Gethsemane prayer is the cup of God's wrath and judgment on human sin; this explains "the *rightness* of Jesus' request" to avoid it if possible. This aversion to "absorbing God's wrath underscores the *righteousness* of Jesus and the perfection of His human nature. . . . His hesitation is a godly one. There would be something wrong if He *didn't* flinch at this" (II:180). We have no record of Jesus' conversation with

the disciples on the road to Emmaus, but Davis walks through about ten passages that may well have filled the space between 24:27 and 28 (II:227–29).

Davis’s commentary incorporates frequent practical, personal applications. He muses whether Mary’s mutually edifying fellowship with Elizabeth—despite their decades of age difference—might not be a biblical corrective to the modern church’s tendency to divide up its congregation according to age, background, social status, interests, etc. (I:32). Regarding Nazareth’s low esteem for one of their own (Luke 4), Davis addresses those who sit unmoved in churches for years or decades: “Being familiar with Jesus can be dreadfully dangerous” (I:82). “Judas,” Davis similarly cautions, “becomes a standing warning that closeness [proximity] to Jesus and faithlessness to Jesus can easily coexist” (I:111). To Jesus’ seemingly outlandish command that Peter cast his nets despite an entirely fishless night, Davis attaches a caution. “Jesus *does* at times seem to operate in ‘foolish’ and irrational ways that don’t make sense.” But be wary of assuming, therefore, that “Jesus *only* works in strange and bizarre and unexpected ways,” or that, if it seems nonsensical, it *must* be God’s leading. Sometimes, “if it seems weird, it may just be weird,” traceable to our thinking rather than God’s direction (I:89).

The Martha-Mary narrative (Luke 10) “should keep us from psychological interpretations that go on about how we really need both our Martha- and Mary-types in the church. You may find something like that in another text somewhere, but don’t try to drag it out of this one” (I:189). The core of this incident “is that true service for Christ does not consist in what we in our busyness can give Jesus but in receiving what He delights to give us, namely, His word.” Adding a pointed application to pastors, Davis—himself a pastor for decades—rubbishes advertisements appealing to the “busy” pastor who apparently “doesn’t have time to ponder or think or read” because he is too busy. “I repudiate the busy-pastor model. I don’t think there should be any busy pastors” if it means not having time to sit quietly at Jesus’ feet with Mary. Such “ministerial busyness . . . empties the soul” (I:192).

Not averse to making pointed applications to his own circle, he titles the second parable in Luke 18 (vv. 9–14) “The Presbyterian and the Publican.” Because Christ beheld hell in Gethsemane and in the cup, and experienced it quite literally on the cross, Davis issues a vigorous censure against describing our experience as “hell” or even as “our Gethsemane”—“since the ‘cup’ is unique, Gethsemane is unique.” To suggest that we may have a “Gethsemane” experience is “almost blasphemous” (II:181). Whereas there is much in the OT about Christ, Davis cautions against an overly “‘Christocentric’ approach to OT exposition” as though “everything or every passage in the OT is about Him”; such a view goes “beyond what Jesus actually says” in 24:44 (II:236).

One reason I like Davis so much is that his interpretational approach and instincts frequently mirror my own. That does not mean, of course, that I never disagree with him. Davis posits that Luke moves the Nazareth synagogue episode (Luke 4) earlier in his account for strategic reasons (I:78). It seems more likely (per some harmonies) that the Luke 4 episode (recorded only by Luke) was, in fact, early in Christ’s ministry, whereas Matthew 13 and Mark 6 record a later visit to Nazareth. The reference to a previous ministry in Capernaum (4:23) is easily answered by the long-distance healing of a sick child there, an incident recorded only by John (4:46–54).

Though I agree with Davis’s correction of how we understand the term “Abba” (I:196), his data for pre-Christian Jews addressing God as Father in prayer is incomplete; he cites several apocryphal

references, but there is important OT precedent for the practice as well (e.g., Ps 89:26; Isa 63:16; 64:8). Jesus distinctively *accentuates* this relational aspect of prayer, but his instruction in this regard is neither novel nor innovative.

Davis misses (in my opinion) the larger biblical-theological significance of the term “exodus” (9:31) in Luke’s version of the transfiguration account (I:157–58). Davis rightly identifies the divine dimension of the disciples’ “amazing density” in failing to comprehend Jesus’ predictions of his impending death and resurrection (in 9:45 and 18:34); but he never offers any explanation for that divine concealment and seems to overlook its express reversal in 24:45.

Part of Davis’s appeal is his down-to-earthiness conversational style, but sometimes it confuses cleverness with corniness and borders on Dad humor. He titles the section on the parable of the unjust estate manager (16:1–8) as “Slick, the Sly Steward,” refers to 18:15–17 as the story of “Jesus and the Little Shavers,” and summarizes the celestial celebration in 15:7, 10 as a time “when heaven throws parties and angels exchange ‘high fives’ over a repentant sinner” (II:35). Disagreements over details are to be expected in any commentary, and the intermittent colloquialisms amount to little more than the occasional raised eyebrow or indulgent groan. But Davis’s handling of the text itself is consistently serious, insightful, and penetrating.

For the ordinary Christian in the pew who wants to understand a book of the Bible better, I cannot recommend a more accessible or enjoyable commentary; for the Sunday School teacher or Bible study group, a more efficient and usable commentary; or for the pastor (“busy” or not), a more lively fellowship over the Scriptures with an informed and experienced fellow minister, than Davis’s commentaries, including this latest one on Luke’s Gospel.

Layton Talbert

Professor of Theology | BJU Seminary