

## Introduction to the Gospel of Luke

Luke 1:1-4

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Luke 1:1-4 - <sup>1</sup> *Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, <sup>2</sup> just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, <sup>3</sup> it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.*

2 Timothy 3:16-17 - *"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."*

### **Introduction: Enjoying Biographies**

I like to read a lot. Sometimes I buy too many books and start more than I finish, but I do like to read. You would assume that since I'm a pastor that I love to read really deep theology. And you would be half-right. I do read theology books, but I don't gravitate to them. I mean, sure, if I want to fall asleep quicker at night, I will try to get through a few pages of the Puritan John Owen or the Dutch theologian Herman Ridderbos, it's not the first thing I'd pick up. I see the value in reading theology, I need to do it more, but when I'm home, I usually prefer to enjoy what I'm reading and use it a bit as an escape. So I enjoy fiction. More adventure stories than mysteries. At the top of my list of non-fiction enjoyment is biographies and autobiographies. I'm not sure why I'm so drawn to the story of people's lives, especially ones written by the people themselves. I mean, the biographies are usually written about dead people whose lives have already happened, and the autobiographies are always written by people who really like themselves, so we can't trust them to be too accurate.

I find myself wanting to read Alex Trebek's or Matthew McConaughey's new autobiographies. One of the all-time most meaningful, life-changing books I ever read was Keith Green's biography written by his wife, Melody, called *No Compromise*. He was a Christian musician who took his faith as seriously as anyone I had ever heard about until he died in a plane crash in 1982. I read it as a 17-year-old and it really helped solidify my faith. I have recently read a biography of Martin Luther, as well as autobiographies by Steven Curtis Chapman, Nick Foles (after he was the Eagles' Super Bowl MVP), Bruce Dickinson (the lead singer of Iron Maiden), and Val Kilmer, the actor. How's that for a weird collection? I own a stack of biographies of Presidents and other significant American figures on my shelves waiting to be read, but apparently, I really favor recent people. Maybe there's some strange fascination with successful famous people that I think I'll figure out something about how they lived that made them get to where they are. Maybe I just want to know that they have really ordinary lives too. And that they're flawed. Nick Foles almost quit football, Steven Curtis Chapman struggled with understanding God's love after his daughter was accidentally killed, all these actors and singers wrestle with insecurity, addiction, and broken marriages. I guess it gives me hope that I can live a solid life despite my flaws, my bad decisions, and my insecurities.

But today we get to delve into one of the four greatest biographies ever written. Its subject never wrote a book about Himself because He knew that He was leaving a legacy that would be captured in writing. And unlike the other subjects of the books I've been reading, this man had no flaws or misdeeds, though He lived a life of sorrow and grief. But far from that alienating the reader from

Him, His life, His actions, His obvious love for those around Him draw the reader in. Several of His biographers knew Him very well, they lived life with Him, and so could tell stories that they had witnessed and experienced. The biographer who is going to guide us through this man's life never met his subject. But he set out to interview the people who had been there, to get all of his facts straight, and to put all of his considerable talent behind producing the most reliable and true account possible. Thank God for a man named Luke who dedicated himself to writing the best biography that he could about a man named Jesus.

We're only dealing with the first 4 verses of this book that has 1,151 total verses. Don't worry, we'll take bigger chunks as we go (and we'll break it up with other sermon series next summer), but this will help us get a good background and introduction. Let's look at the first 2 ½ verses to understand the writer and his context better.

### **I. The Writer (vv. 1-3a)**

*<sup>1</sup> Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, <sup>2</sup> just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, <sup>3</sup> it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account*

Which author was the biggest contributor to the New Testament? Paul, right? He wrote 13 books. Nope. John? He wrote a Gospel, three letters, and Revelation. Nope. That would be Luke who only wrote 2 books, his Gospel and Acts. Those two books make up 27% of the New Testament, he wrote the most words and verses. We might have still had a great picture of Jesus' life with only three Gospels, but in God's providence, He ordained four Gospel writers. And can you imagine if we didn't have the book of Acts? We would know so little of the early church from the insider's perspective. Here is Luke's preface to his second book, Acts 1:1-2: "*In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom He had chosen.*" And then he launches into the stories of the apostles and the early church. Luke and Acts form a continuing narrative; I sometimes wonder why John didn't get moved up in the Gospel order so that Luke and Acts could be back-to-back, but there are solid reasons why, as John was written so much later, and is so different, than the first three. It seems to have been written to fill in the gaps of the other three Gospels. The other three – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – are what are called the Synoptic Gospels, which means similar (syn=together, optic=see). They often record the same stories and parables, sometimes using the same wording. If you've ever looked at a "Harmony of the Gospels," it's interesting to read through and see where the Synoptics line up and diverge.

Luke acknowledges in verse 1 that many other people had written a narrative of Jesus' life. This obviously includes at least Mark's Gospel, probably Matthew's, but perhaps he's referring to written accounts that didn't make the final inclusion in the canon of Scripture because of their inaccuracy or because they just weren't validated with apostolic authority. Since Luke was not an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry like John or Matthew or Peter (Mark's source), he interviewed the eyewitnesses, the ones who were there. Now, Luke was a friend of Paul's, and an eyewitness of Paul's missionary journeys, as we see in Acts 20:6 and beyond when he switches from talking about Paul's team as "they" and starts using "we." But for Jesus' life, he was an investigative journalist who carefully researched and interviewed people to find the facts. I am convinced that he interviewed Jesus' mother, Mary, because we have so much information about her inner thoughts and her conversations. We don't know for sure who else he talked to because he didn't footnote or mention his sources. But one historian said this about Luke's skill in interviewing and getting the details right: "Wherever modern scholarship has been able to check up on the accuracy of Luke's work the

judgment has been unanimous: he is one of the finest and ablest historians in the ancient world.”<sup>1</sup> There is no reason to doubt Luke’s scholarship and accuracy just because he actually believes what he wrote about. This is not his philosophy or a theory – these are events that happened in specific times and places.

Additionally, as with all the writers of Scripture, God guided Luke’s writings. I already quoted 2 Timothy 3:16-17 after reading the passage - “*All Scripture is breathed out by God...*” 2 Peter 1:20-21 tells us that, “*knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*” So Luke had a co-writer, so to speak, in his process of interviewing people and selecting the material that he would include in his historical account. Something that historians like Josephus did not have: the guidance of the Holy Spirit to make sure that he got everything correct. Praise God that we can have complete confidence in this book, as we can with all of the Scriptures!

So who was Luke? We don’t know a whole lot, other than what we can pick up from Paul’s letters and internal information from his own writings. Luke was a doctor, as Paul mentions in Colossians 4:14: “*Luke, the beloved physician, greets you*”. His descriptions of diseases and medical conditions show the training of one in the medical field. In Philemon verse 24, Paul also included him among his list of his “*fellow workers*,” so he was more of a medical missionary and part of Paul’s team, not just a guy writing notes for his books. Finally, in 2 Timothy 4:11 Paul states that “*Luke alone is with me*,” which would have been at the end of Paul’s life, during his imprisonment in Rome. Colossians 4:10-17 listed Paul’s companions and separated them into the “circumcised ones” or Jews and the others, the Gentiles. Luke is not listed with the Jews, so Luke was a Gentile. He was well educated and wrote in the most sophisticated language of any NT writer – over 700 words appear in Luke’s writings that are not found elsewhere in the NT.<sup>2</sup> His writings are both theologically rich and historically reliable.

Back to verses 3 and 4, who was this book written to and why?

## **II. The Reader (vv. 3b-4)**

*to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.*

Luke addresses this Gospel to Theophilus, as he also mentions Theophilus in the first verse of the book of Acts. Who is this person that Luke has written two long historical accounts for? The fact that he used the phrase “most excellent” or “most honorable” in some translations means that he might be a Roman official. He is almost certainly a Gentile as well. We can’t be sure exactly who this is, it might just be a friend of Luke’s. But we also recognize that Luke had done a ton of research, and it makes sense that he hoped that this account of Jesus’ life would reach far and wide. And not only was it treasured by the early church, but it has endured in the canon of Scripture as one of four Gospels. And since the name Theophilus means “lover of God,” anybody who reads it can feel that Luke is writing straight to them.

What was the reason that Luke wrote this for Theophilus to read? To give him certainty. He had apparently been taught the basics of Jesus’ life and teachings, but Luke wanted to give him absolute certainty that these things had happened, and that Jesus’ life was real and amazing. Yes, we have

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<sup>1</sup> Otto Piper, “The Purpose of Luke,” *Union Seminary Review* 67.1 (Nov. 1945), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Card, *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), pp. 15-21.

faith in Jesus, but it is not an empty faith – it is a faith that is based on true, provable, verifiable facts. And we still read the Gospels today, hopefully over and over to remind us of our certainty. We live our lives going to work, to school, eating every few hours, distracting ourselves with hobbies and entertainment. And sometimes the idea that God came in the flesh and lived a perfect life, teaching the deep truths of God’s ways, and then dying for us does not seem real or particularly convincing. So, we dive back into the historical accounts and we are reminded that it’s all real.

(Maybe at the very end)

Remember in the 7<sup>th</sup> Star Wars movie, *The Force Awakens*, when Rey asks Han Solo, “The Jedi were real?” Han answers, “I used to wonder about that myself. Thought it was a bunch of mumbo-jumbo. A magical power holding together good and evil... the dark side and the light. Crazy thing is... it’s true. The Force. The Jedi. All of it. It’s all true.” Now I realize that I run the risk of equating Christian faith with the Force with that illustration; that’s dangerous – the Gospel is not the Force. But we say with Luke something similar to those who are wondering if it’s real: “The countless fulfilled prophecies. The God of the universe taking on flesh and joining His creation as one of them. The virgin birth. The miracles, the healings. The profound teachings. The betrayal, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension. The sacrificial death on the cross taking my sins and giving me righteousness that gets me to heaven. All of it. It’s all true.” That’s why we study this historical account of this unique, amazing life.

### III. Distinctives of Luke’s Gospel

I know that I said that Luke is very similar to Matthew and Mark, but about 30% of Luke’s Gospel is material that is not recorded in the other Gospels. Some of the most distinctive teachings and interactions of Jesus are only found in Luke – the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, Zacchaeus the repentant tax collector, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, the rich man and Lazarus. Can you imagine not having those stories?

Luke cared about the outsiders seemingly more than the other Gospel writers – he emphasized the shepherds, the widows, the poor, the Gentiles. Luke’s gospel introduces the most women, not just the three Marys, but Elizabeth, Anna, Martha, Joanna, Susanna, and many women in Jesus’ parables. Not that the other Gospels were sexist and elitist (they had other things they were emphasizing), but Luke seems to uniquely emphasize those things.

Kent Hughes says that “Matthew’s keynote is ‘royalty,’ Mark’s is ‘power,’ and Luke’s is ‘love.’ (John is spirit?) Love uniquely shines through in saying after saying and parable after parable in this Gospel.”<sup>3</sup> To keep the four Gospels straight, you may have heard of an image from Ezekiel chapter 1 that is repeated in Revelation 4: four creatures or faces on creatures: a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. Theologians have assigned those animals to each Gospel writer:<sup>4</sup>

- Matthew is the Man because he started his Gospel with Jesus’ genealogy and His humanity.
- Mark is the Lion because he began with John the Baptist’s strong preaching in the wilderness, and because his style is direct, to the point.
- John is the Eagle because there are very few parables, Jesus speaks plainly and openly, an eagle is from above, so he describes the logos of God, the secrets of heaven.
- Luke is the Ox, the sacrificial animal; not only does the Gospel start with the priesthood, but Jesus is the sacrifice for His people.

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<sup>3</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know The Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> For a deeper discussion, see Robert Engelbach’s article “The Four Living Creatures and The Gospels” found at <http://www.spiritofthescriture.com/id3198-the-four-living-creatures-and-the-gospels.html>.

Take that with a grain of salt, Calvin and many other writers essentially say, “Uh, that’s a little far-fetched, I kind of doubt it.” But if it helps you keep the Gospels straight, great.

Michael Card points out that there are over 15 times in Luke’s Gospel where two people or groups of people are shown something, and every time the person that should have understood (because they are a teacher or an insider) didn’t actually understand, and the person who should not have understood (because they are an outsider) actually did get it right!<sup>5</sup> The Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18 – the Pharisee should have known how to pray in a way that pleased God, but he just prayed to brag on himself; whereas the tax collector should have been clueless about prayer, but his humble prayer pleased God. The prodigal son vs. his older brother. The rich man and Lazarus. The priest and Levite vs. the Good Samaritan. Simon the Pharisee and the sinful woman who anointed Jesus. Over and over in his Gospel, Luke draws attention to the contrast between people who were respected and should have said or done the right thing and the lowly, disreputable people who we don’t expect to do anything right but end up pleasing God and Jesus. Let’s keep that framework in mind as we move through this book.

Luke’s thesis statement is most likely chapter 19 verse 10: “*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*” His whole life was a rescue mission, accomplishing all the work that the Father set before Him to do. And He accomplished it, and then handed over the work of spreading that good news to His followers.

### **Conclusion: This Book is for Every Theophilus**

So, if you have been waiting a long time for some hope in your life...

If you are part of the forgotten and overlooked people and wonder if you matter...

If your soul is troubled and guilt overwhelms you at times, and you need answers and peace...

If you have been practicing religion but don’t know quite what the point is anymore...

If you fast, keep the Sabbath, or memorize Scripture, but you’ve lost your passion for why you do those things...

If you have trouble forgiving the people who sin against you...

If you have friends or family members who followed God but have now walked away from Him...

If you wonder if the Lord can use the gifts and talents that He’s given you in some significant way...

If you’ve driven past people in need who have been beaten down by life and need some love and attention and it always bugs you that you should do more...

If you don’t know how to pray, and wonder why it’s a struggle and if God even hears your prayers...

If you are intimidated by religious professionals and think they have all the answers...

If you are storing up a lot of wealth but sometimes wonder if money owns you rather than the other way around...

If you’ve ripped people off and treated them terribly and wonder if there’s a way to make that right..

If you are a prodigal who has lost your way and you wonder if God can even stand the sight of you...

If you have betrayed God in your words and actions and wonder if He’ll forgive you & restore you..

If you are afraid of death and what comes after our time on earth...

If you wonder if you are actually invited to the great wedding feast of the Lamb in heaven...

If you wonder if you’ll be with Jesus in Paradise someday...

Then I have got just the right book for you! Step into the world of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and the words of Luke as he turns his interviews and research into the most accurate, compelling, honoring portrayal of the God-Man, the Christ. All you lovers of God, let’s dive deep into this book together. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Card, pp. 23-25.