



CHARLES R. SWINDOLL

# SWINDOLL'S LIVING INSIGHTS

NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY

## LUKE



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*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.*  
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# CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>Author's Preface</b> .....  | vii |
| <b>The Strong's Numbering System</b> .....                             | ix  |
| <b>Introduction</b> .....  | 3   |
| <b>Luke's Preface (Luke 1:1-4)</b> .....                               | 15  |
| Only the Best (Luke 1:1-4) .....                                       | 15  |
| <b>Announced and Appearing (Luke 1:5-4:13)</b> .....                   | 24  |
| "A Baby? At Our Age? Get Serious!" (Luke 1:5-25) .....                 | 26  |
| The Day Mary Met Gabriel (Luke 1:26-56) .....                          | 39  |
| The Prophet of the Most High (Luke 1:57-80) .....                      | 53  |
| Nativity Revisited (Luke 2:1-20) .....                                 | 60  |
| A Sacrifice, a Savior, a Sword (Luke 2:21-38) .....                    | 72  |
| The Day the Pupil Stumped the Professors (Luke 2:39-52) .....          | 80  |
| The Greatest Mortal Who Ever Died (Luke 3:1-38) .....                  | 88  |
| The Devil Never Made Him Do It (Luke 4:1-13) .....                     | 102 |
| <b>Ministering and Serving (Luke 4:14-9:50)</b> .....                  | 110 |
| Into the Fire (Luke 4:14-30) .....                                     | 112 |
| Ministry at the Grassroots Level (Luke 4:31-44) .....                  | 119 |
| What It's Like to Fish with Jesus (Luke 5:1-11) .....                  | 130 |
| Great Deeds, Strong Faith, Big God (Luke 5:12-26) .....                | 136 |
| Is It Okay to Party with Sinners? (Luke 5:27-39) .....                 | 145 |
| The Defiant Messiah (Luke 6:1-11) .....                                | 153 |
| "The Twelve" and Their Marching Orders (Luke 6:12-49) .....            | 160 |
| There Is Always Hope (Luke 7:1-17) .....                               | 180 |
| In Defense of a Doubter (Luke 7:18-35) .....                           | 189 |
| The Love and Grace of Jesus (Luke 7:36-50) .....                       | 200 |
| Where Are You in This Picture? (Luke 8:1-21) .....                     | 208 |
| Freedom from Bondage (Luke 8:22-39) .....                              | 220 |
| Never Too Little, Never Too Lost (Luke 8:40-56) .....                  | 231 |
| Welcome to the War (Luke 9:1-11) .....                                 | 239 |
| A Shocking Agenda (Luke 9:12-27) .....                                 | 246 |
| The Ultimate Close Encounter (Luke 9:28-36) .....                      | 257 |
| Snapshots from an Amazing Album (Luke 9:37-50) .....                   | 265 |
| <b>Instructing and Submitting (Luke 9:51-19:27)</b> .....              | 273 |
| A Face Like Flint (Luke 9:51-62) .....                                 | 275 |
| Practical Talk to Those in Ministry (Luke 10:1-16) .....               | 284 |
| Joyful Return, Insightful Response (Luke 10:17-24) .....               | 291 |
| What about My Neighbor's Neighbor? (Luke 10:25-37) .....               | 299 |
| Exchanging What's Good for What's Best (Luke 10:38-42) .....           | 307 |
| Lord, Teach Us to Pray (Luke 11:1-13) .....                            | 313 |
| The Kingdom of Light and the Kingdom of Darkness (Luke 11:14-28) ..... | 321 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Grave Warnings for the “In” Crowd (Luke 11:29-36) . . . . .                         | 327 |
| Clean from the Inside Out (Luke 11:37-54) . . . . .                                 | 334 |
| Marching Orders for True Disciples (Luke 12:1-12) . . . . .                         | 346 |
| The Testimony of a Fool (Luke 12:13-34) . . . . .                                   | 355 |
| People, Get Ready (Luke 12:35-48) . . . . .   | 366 |
| It’s Time to Get Real (Luke 12:49-59) . . . . .                                     | 377 |
| What a Difference Jesus Makes! (Luke 13:1-17) . . . . .                             | 383 |
| Straight Talk for Saints and Sinners (Luke 13:18-35) . . . . .                      | 391 |
| Spiritual Table Manners (Luke 14:1-24) . . . . .                                    | 400 |
| Exacting Expectations (Luke 14:25-35) . . . . .                                     | 409 |
| How to Make the Angels Laugh (Luke 15:1-10) . . . . .                               | 415 |
| Two Rebels under One Roof (Luke 15:11-32) . . . . .                                 | 421 |
| What’s at the Core of Life? (Luke 16:1-18) . . . . .                                | 430 |
| The Subject Everybody Ignores (Luke 16:19-31) . . . . .                             | 439 |
| How Not to Be a Stumbling Block (Luke 17:1-19) . . . . .                            | 446 |
| Knowing Where You Are . . . Knowing Where You’re Going<br>(Luke 17:20-37) . . . . . | 457 |
| You Want to Be Godly? Start Here! (Luke 18:1-17) . . . . .                          | 464 |
| Rich Man, Poor Man, Son of Man . . . Me (Luke 18:18–19:10) . . . . .                | 473 |
| Making Sense with Your Dollars (Luke 19:11-27) . . . . .                            | 487 |
| <b>Conquering and Commissioning (Luke 19:28–24:53)</b> . . . . .                    | 493 |
| The Messiah Confronts Jerusalem (Luke 19:28-48) . . . . .                           | 495 |
| Fighting Fire with Fire (Luke 20:1-47) . . . . .                                    | 503 |
| Lifting the Prophetic Veil (Luke 21:1-38) . . . . .                                 | 519 |
| Strong Leadership in Stormy Times (Luke 22:1-30) . . . . .                          | 530 |
| The Darkest of All Nights (Luke 22:31-65) . . . . .                                 | 539 |
| The Day the Sun Refused to Shine (Luke 22:66–23:46) . . . . .                       | 551 |
| The Day the Son Came Out Again (Luke 23:47–24:12) . . . . .                         | 570 |
| The Master Says Farewell to His Friends (Luke 24:13-53) . . . . .                   | 578 |
| <b>Endnotes</b> . . . . .   | 591 |
| <b>List of Features and Images</b>  |     |
| Timeline of Luke . . . . .  | 2   |
| Map: Significant Places in Jesus’ Ministry . . . . .                                | 2   |
| The Gospel of Luke at a Glance . . . . .  | 4   |
| Map: Luke Travels with Paul . . . . .   | 7   |
| Herod the Great . . . . .   | 30  |
| Herodium . . . . .  | 31  |
| The Holy Place in Herod’s Temple . . . . .  | 32  |
| The Allotment of Priests Serving in the Temple . . . . .                            | 33  |
| Nazareth . . . . .  | 43  |
| Nazareth Ridge . . . . .  | 43  |
| The Star of Caesar Augustus . . . . .   | 63  |
| Stone Bust of Augustus . . . . .  | 63  |
| Map: Joseph and Mary’s Journey to Bethlehem . . . . .                               | 64  |
| Caravansary . . . . .   | 66  |
| Ritually Unclean . . . . .  | 74  |
| Map: Israel after Herod the Great . . . . .   | 82  |
| Map: Area of Galilee . . . . .  | 122 |
| The Synagogue at Capernaum . . . . .  | 123 |
| The Pharisees . . . . .   | 141 |
| Son of Man . . . . .  | 143 |
| Parables . . . . .  | 213 |
| Map: Capernaum, Bethsaida, and the Hill Country . . . . .                           | 244 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Ruins of the Temple at Mount Gerizim . . . . .             | 278 |
| A Brief History of Samaria . . . . .                       | 279 |
| Excursus: The Legend of Lucifer . . . . .                  | 293 |
| Phylactery . . . . .                                       | 302 |
| Map: From Galilee to Bethany . . . . .                     | 308 |
| Slavery in the First Century . . . . .                     | 372 |
| Millstone . . . . .  | 450 |
| Map: Traditional Route from Galilee to Jerusalem . . . . . | 480 |
| Map: Area of Jerusalem . . . . .                           | 498 |
| Coin of Tiberius . . . . .                                 | 513 |
| The Sadducees . . . . .                                    | 514 |
| Jewish Calendar and Festival Cycle . . . . .               | 533 |
| Map: Jerusalem . . . . .                                   | 545 |
| The Trials of Jesus . . . . .                              | 547 |
| The Mistrials of Jesus . . . . .                           | 556 |
| Sanhedrin Hall . . . . .                                   | 558 |
| Pilate's Residence . . . . .                               | 561 |
| Herod Antipas . . . . .                                    | 563 |
| Cross . . . . .  | 567 |
| Tomb with Rollaway Stone . . . . .                         | 575 |



## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

**F**or more than sixty years I have loved the Bible. It was that love for the Scriptures, mixed with a clear call into the gospel ministry during my tour of duty in the Marine Corps, that resulted in my going to Dallas Theological Seminary to prepare for a lifetime of ministry. During those four great years I had the privilege of studying under outstanding men of God, who also loved God's Word. They not only held the inerrant Word of God in high esteem, they taught it carefully, preached it passionately, and modeled it consistently. A week never passes without my giving thanks to God for the grand heritage that has been mine to claim! I am forever indebted to those fine theologians and mentors, who cultivated in me a strong commitment to the understanding, exposition, and application of God's truth.

For more than fifty years I have been engaged in doing just that—*and how I love it!* I confess without hesitation that I am addicted to the examination and the proclamation of the Scriptures. Because of this, books have played a major role in my life for as long as I have been in ministry—especially those volumes that explain the truths and enhance my understanding of what God has written. Through these many years I have collected a large personal library, which has proven invaluable as I have sought to remain a faithful student of the Bible. To the end of my days, my major goal in life is to communicate the Word with accuracy, insight, clarity, and practicality. Without informative and reliable books to turn to, I would have “run dry” decades ago.

Among my favorite and most well-worn volumes are those that have enabled me to get a better grasp of the biblical text. Like most expositors, I am forever searching for literary tools that I can use to hone my gifts and sharpen my skills. For me, that means finding resources that make the complicated simple and easy to understand, that offer insightful comments and word pictures that enable me to see the relevance of sacred truth in light of my twenty-first-century world, and that drive those truths home to my heart in ways I do not easily forget. When I come across such books, they wind up in my hands as I devour them and then place them in my library for further reference . . . and, believe me, I often return to them. What a relief it is to have these resources to turn to when I lack fresh insight, or when I need just the right story or illustration, or when I get stuck in the tangled text and cannot find my way out. For the serious expositor, a library is essential. As a mentor of mine once said, “Where else can you have ten thousand professors at your fingertips?”

In recent years I have discovered there are not nearly enough resources like those I just described. It was such a discovery that prompted me to consider

becoming a part of the answer instead of lamenting the problem. But the solution would result in a huge undertaking. A writing project that covers all of the books and letters of the New Testament seemed overwhelming and intimidating. A rush of relief came when I realized that during the past fifty-plus years I've taught and preached through most of the New Testament. In my files were folders filled with notes from those messages that were just lying there, waiting to be brought out of hiding, given a fresh and relevant touch in light of today's needs, and applied to fit into the lives of men and women who long for a fresh word from the Lord. *That did it!* I began to work on plans to turn all of those notes into this commentary on the New Testament.

I must express my gratitude to both Mark Gaither and Mike Svigel for their tireless and devoted efforts, serving as my hands-on, day-to-day editors. They have done superb work as we have walked our way through the verses and chapters of all twenty-seven New Testament books. It has been a pleasure to see how they have taken my original material and helped me shape it into a style that remains true to the text of the Scriptures, at the same time interestingly and creatively developed, and all the while allowing my voice to come through in a natural and easy-to-read manner.

I need to add sincere words of appreciation to the congregations I have served in various parts of these United States for more than five decades. It has been my good fortune to be the recipient of their love, support, encouragement, patience, and frequent words of affirmation as I have fulfilled my calling to stand and deliver God's message year after year. The sheep from all those flocks have endeared themselves to this shepherd in more ways than I can put into words . . . and none more than those I currently serve with delight at Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, Texas.

Finally, I must thank my wife, Cynthia, for her understanding of my addiction to studying, to preaching, and to writing. Never has she discouraged me from staying at it. Never has she failed to urge me in the pursuit of doing my very best. On the contrary, her affectionate support personally, and her own commitment to excellence in leading *Insight for Living* for more than three and a half decades, have combined to keep me faithful to my calling "in season and out of season." Without her devotion to me and apart from our mutual partnership throughout our lifetime of ministry together, *Swindoll's Living Insights* would never have been undertaken.

I am grateful that it has now found its way into your hands and, ultimately, onto the shelves of your library. My continued hope and prayer is that you will find these volumes helpful in your own study and personal application of the Bible. May they help you come to realize, as I have over these many years, that God's Word is as timeless as it is true.

The grass withers, the flower fades,  
But the word of our God stands forever. (Isa. 40:8, NASB)

*Chuck Swindoll*  
Frisco, Texas

# THE STRONG'S NUMBERING SYSTEM

Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary uses the Strong's word-study numbering system to give both newer and more advanced Bible students alike quicker, more convenient access to helpful original-language tools (e.g., concordances, lexicons, and theological dictionaries). The Strong's numbering system, made popular by the *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, is used with the majority of biblical Greek and Hebrew reference works. Those who are unfamiliar with the ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek alphabets can quickly find information on a given word by looking up the appropriate index number. Advanced students will find the system helpful because it allows them to quickly find the lexical form of obscure conjugations and inflections.

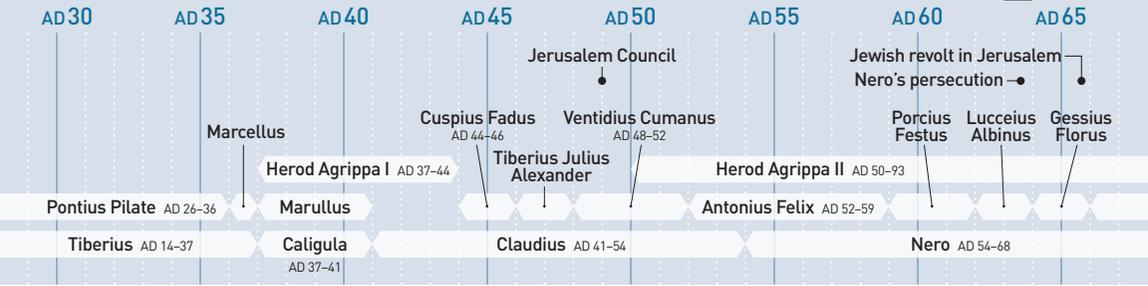
When a Greek word is mentioned in the text, the Strong's number is included in square brackets after the Greek word. So in the example of the Greek word *agapē* [26], "love," the number is used with Greek tools keyed to the Strong's system.

On occasion, a Hebrew word is mentioned in the text. The Strong's Hebrew numbers are completely separate from the Greek numbers, so Hebrew numbers are prefixed with a letter "H." So, for example, the Hebrew word *kapporet* [H3727], "mercy seat," comes from *kopher* [H3722], "to ransom," "to secure favor through a gift."

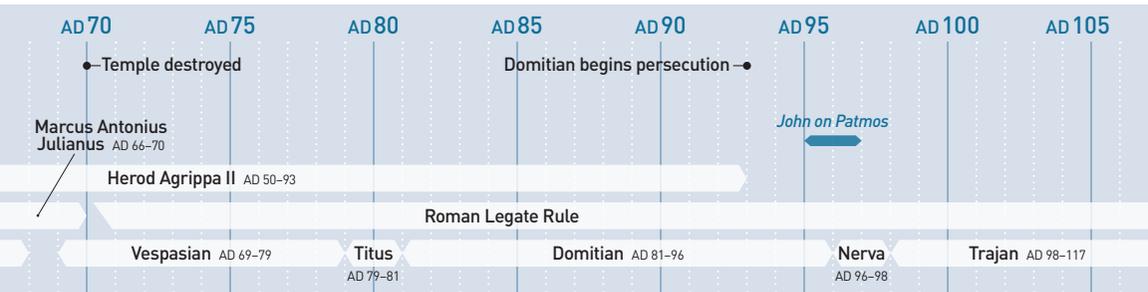


## INSIGHTS ON LUKE

*Throughout Luke's Gospel, we discover why a mere man should become the object of our faith, hope, and worship: His confrontation of evil. His welcoming of sinners. His obedience to the Father. His willingness to suffer on our behalf. His conquest over death. And His open invitation to His adopted brothers and sisters to become a new race of humanity. Luke painstakingly presents Jesus as a human, but one who is extraordinary, not only because of his divinity, but also because of his character.*



Luke begins his story of Jesus' life in the hill country of Judea, with John the Baptizer's birth and Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Jesus would spend much of his ministry in and around Galilee, preaching and healing. Eventually, the story returns to Judea, portraying Jesus traveling to Jerusalem and ministering in the area of the city before his death there.



# LUKE

## INTRODUCTION

### THE DOCTOR GIVES A SECOND OPINION

**L**uke was a people person. You can tell by the way he described the people he knew. You can also tell by the way he presented Jesus in his Gospel. He offers a perspective distinct from that of the other Gospel writers—a second opinion, if you will. Matthew established Jesus as the legitimate heir to David’s throne, the King of the Jews, and the long-awaited Messiah. Mark described Him as the nonsense God-man who came from heaven “to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). John emphasized the mystery of Jesus’ deity and presented Him as the tangible embodiment of divine truth. But Luke, a physician, shows how Jesus compassionately identified with the neediness of humanity. Luke marvels that God, moved by love for us, would make Himself so vulnerable.

Luke shows us an all-powerful creator taking on the fragile frame of a mortal. His Gospel presents a messiah who is never so deified as to be distant or uncaring. On the contrary, the man, Jesus, climbs down from the heavenly realms to enter the clutter and chaos of our fallen world and to subject Himself to our faults and frailties, pains and passions, sorrows and sicknesses. Only in Luke’s account do we see the Almighty wrapped in swaddling clothes, a helpless infant laid in a manger. We see the Christ child match wits with the greatest theological minds of His day and become fully aware of His dual nature—His divine origin, divine purpose, and divine destiny born in human flesh. We see Jesus as a minister, healing throngs of diseased and disfigured people for no reason other than love.

Luke’s carefully researched and sensitively written account of Jesus’ life highlights the God-man’s humanity more keenly than the other

# THE GOSPEL OF LUKE AT A GLANCE

| SECTION   | LUKE'S PREFACE                                    | ANNOUNCED AND APPEARING  |
|-----------|---|--|
| PASSAGE   | 1:1-4   | 1:5-4:13   |
| THEMES    | Luke's purpose:<br><br>Accuracy<br><br>Excellence | The humanity of the God-man<br><br>The astonishment of witnesses<br><br>The fulfillment of God's promises<br><br>Jesus as the promised Messiah |
| KEY TERMS |   | Amazed<br>Tell good news<br>Lord<br>Immediately<br>Christ/Messiah  |

| MINISTERING AND SERVING | INSTRUCTING AND SUBMITTING | CONQUERING AND COMMISSIONING |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| 4:14–9:50               | 9:51–19:27                 | 19:28–24:53                  |

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Christ's authority over evil and the world it has corrupted</p> <p>The kingdom of God</p> <p>The meaning of discipleship</p> <p>The Lord's shocking agenda</p> <p>"Son of Man"</p> | <p>The Lord's intention to confront Jerusalem</p> <p>The differences between the present world order and the kingdom of God</p> <p>The failure of Israel (as a nation) to fulfill its divine purpose</p> <p>The cost of discipleship and its future reward</p> | <p>The Messiah's right to rule Israel and the temple</p> <p>Israel's rejection of their Messiah</p> <p>The future of Israel and the world</p> <p>Christ's atonement for sin</p> <p>The Lord's resurrection</p> |
|---|--|--|

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| <p>Disciples</p> <p>Authority</p> <p>Kingdom</p> <p>Parable</p> <p>Faith</p> <p>Follow</p> | <p>Send out</p> <p>Generation</p> <p>Repent</p> <p>Crowds</p> <p>Save</p> | <p>Hand over</p> <p>Suffer</p> <p>Pray</p> <p>Receive</p> |
|--|---|---|

three Gospels, implicitly placing its emphasis on the Messiah’s prophetic name: Immanuel, “God with us” (Isa. 7:14). Luke shows us that this very humanity was the vehicle God chose to manifest His character and confront the sickly darkness of the world order with the wholeness and righteousness of His kingdom.

### “IT SEEMED FITTING FOR ME AS WELL TO WRITE”

The Bible doesn’t tell us much about Luke. We know for certain he was a Gentile by birth. When Paul listed the members of his team in a letter to the Colossians, he counted Luke among those who did not bear the outward sign of God’s covenant with Abraham (Col. 4:10-14). The early church father Origen (ca. 185–254) identified Luke as the “Lucius” mentioned by Paul in Romans 16:21,<sup>1</sup> and this is a possibility, given the relatively late date of the letter in Paul’s career. Later scholars have suggested that Luke was Lucius of Cyrene (Acts 13:1), one of the leaders in Antioch who commissioned Paul and Barnabas for the first missionary journey. Church tradition lends some assent to this theory, placing Luke in Antioch very early in church history, but the evidence is very weak. On the contrary, in Acts, Luke appears to be a junior member of Paul’s evangelistic team rather than a leading member of the most influential Gentile church at that time.

If we take Scripture on its own, a more plausible theory of Luke’s identity emerges. Our best evidence comes from three clear references in Paul’s letters and three extended passages in Acts where Luke writes in the first person “we,” indicating his own personal involvement in the narrative. It’s not a lot to go on, but there are enough clues to tell us what we need to know about the man who chronicled the Lord’s life and the immediate impact of the gospel in the first century.

#### LUKE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Acts 16:10-17

Acts 20:5-21:18

Acts 27:1-28:16

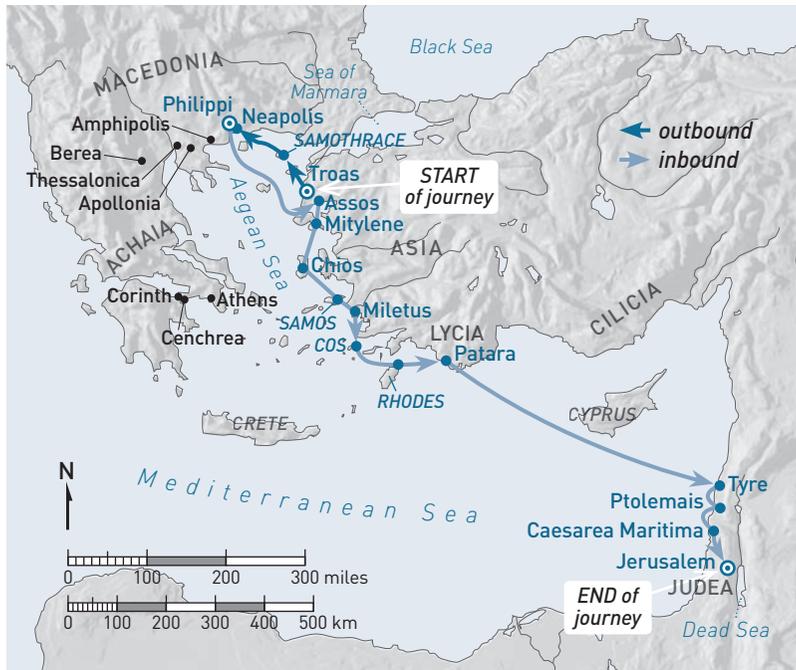
Colossians 4:14

Philemon 1:24

2 Timothy 4:11

According to the first of three “we” passages in Acts, it seems that Luke first encountered Paul in Troas during the apostle’s second

missionary journey. Paul and Silas’s team had been trying to penetrate the Roman provinces of Bithynia, Asia, and Mysia with the gospel, but “the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them” (Acts 16:7). So they settled in the seaport city of Troas to consider their next move. During their stay, Paul had a night vision that convinced the men to plot a new course through Macedonia and Greece. Luke traveled with the team from Troas to Philippi, where he witnessed the beating and imprisonment of Paul and Silas (Acts 16:22-40), and as a physician (Col. 4:14), he may have been helpful in treating the men’s wounds. When the team continued on to Thessalonica and then Greece, they did so without Luke, leaving him in Philippi. No negative circumstance is mentioned for his staying, and this may be an indication that Philippi had been his home before he met Paul in Troas.



**Luke Travels with Paul.** Luke met Paul during the course of Paul’s second missionary journey (Acts 15:36–18:22). Paul left him to work in Philippi, and then Luke rejoined him for the journey back to Jerusalem.

We do not know whether Luke was a believer before encountering Paul. Other than using the plural pronoun “we,” he appears to have deliberately omitted direct reference to himself in the story of Christ (The Gospel of Luke) and the rise of the church (The Acts of the Apostles). He

does not reveal when, where, or how he became a Christian, but there are two strong possibilities.

First, it is possible Luke became a believer as a direct result of Paul's ministry in Troas, where he first includes himself ("we") in the narrative (Acts 16:10-11). He may have heard about the Hebrew God from Jews living in and around Philippi, which prepared him to hear the gospel from Paul and accept Jesus as the Messiah. Or he may have been one of the many pagans living in the region, where the profiteers of pagan mystery religions held the political strings (Acts 16:16, 19-21). At least one biographer identified Luke as the "man of Macedonia" in Paul's vision (Acts 16:9), but this is mere speculation.<sup>2</sup> Regardless, Luke's conversion may have added extra weight to Paul's vision.

Second, Luke may have heard about Christ from a Jewish convert returning from Pentecost (Acts 2). Although Lydia (Acts 16:14) is often noted as Paul's first convert in Europe, there is evidence that Christianity preceded Paul in cities all across the empire. Paul wrote to the believers in Rome without having ever visited them, and Paul's letter to Titus indicates that the gospel had even reached the remote island of Crete before the apostle's visit. Christians undoubtedly existed in Macedonia but remained isolated and unorganized, and Luke may have been one of them. This would explain his readiness to go with Paul, which seems evident as he writes, "When he [Paul] had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia" (Acts 16:10).

Paul referred to Luke as a "physician" (Col. 4:14), a term that, in the ancient world, said more about a person's calling and character than his expertise or training. Although surgeries were sometimes performed, medical practice in the first century generally involved herbal remedies and traditional therapies, and there were no accrediting boards or standardized curriculums. Those who called themselves physicians had devoted themselves to helping the sick. Most had studied under another, more experienced practitioner to learn the field. This suggests that Luke had received a good education.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, his literary style compares favorably with classical Greek historians, demonstrating his ability to gather research, arrange facts well, and then prepare a very readable history.

Luke's chosen profession may have prompted Paul to add him to his evangelistic team, although he does not appear to have become a permanent member of the group until the end of the third missionary journey. On that last tour, Paul and his entourage passed through Philippi on their way to Greece, again without adding Luke to their

numbers. After several months of ministry in Greece, Paul intended to sail directly home from Cenchrea (a port city near Corinth), but a plot to kill him changed his plans. To distract any would-be assassins, he instructed his team to board a ship in Cenchrea as originally planned, but to sail for Troas, where he would rendezvous with them. Meanwhile, he retraced his steps through Philippi (Acts 20:2-5), where evidently he invited Luke to join him. It seems clear from the second “we” passage (Acts 20:5–21:18) that Luke accompanied Paul to Troas, and it is implied that he remained Paul’s traveling companion for the rest of the apostle’s life.

The third “we” passage (Acts 27:1–28:16) follows Paul from his arrest in Jerusalem to confinement in the palace of Herod Agrippa, then along the journey to Rome, and on through his two years of house arrest awaiting trial. No one knows for certain where Paul traveled after his release, but within a couple of years, he was back in Rome and again in prison. As he penned his final letter to Timothy and prepared for the end, he mentioned that only Luke remained at his side (2 Tim. 4:11).

## “AN ORDERLY ACCOUNT”

Luke acknowledged that “many” had undertaken to write an account of Jesus’ life (Luke 1:1), which probably refers to what Darrell Bock calls “a fluid pool of traditions from which both Luke and Matthew drew.”<sup>4</sup> Mark had written his account to spur early saints into action, but it was not a “history,” per se. Consequently, believers eager for more information about the Lord started collecting and circulating their own stories and sayings of Jesus. The evidence strongly suggests Luke drew some information from Mark’s Gospel and then, as he traveled with Paul, gathered scraps of various stories and source materials. These various accounts, according to Luke, prompted him to write a more excellent account. In this way, you could say the doctor offered a second opinion.

Luke, having considered the story of Jesus as a whole, settled on a perspective that he—prompted and superintended by the Holy Spirit—felt compelled to share. He then arranged and organized the data he had meticulously gathered and verified in order to craft the story of Christ, not only for the sake of fact-telling, but also to convey a heavenly, cosmic message. The latest revision of the NASB uses the phrase “in consecutive order” in Luke 1:3, but I believe the rendering “an orderly account” (NIV, ESV) or “an accurate account” (NLT) is better. The Greek word means “orderly” or “in sequence according to time, space, or *logic*.” Ancient cultures did not see chronology as the most obvious

means of relating history. Luke shaped his Gospel narrative geographically. While he didn't hide the fact that Jesus traversed Israel freely between Galilee and Jerusalem throughout His ministry, he nevertheless structured the narrative as a journey from north to south, from Nazareth to the temple.

After relaying the stories surrounding Jesus' birth, childhood, and preparation for ministry (1:1–4:13), Luke portrays the ministry of Jesus as based in or near Galilee (4:14–9:50). He then places several episodes within the framework of a journey south after the Lord “determined to go to Jerusalem” (9:51–19:27). Finally, Luke describes the culmination of Jesus' mission in Jerusalem (19:29–24:53).<sup>5</sup>

While Luke's narrative takes place entirely in Israel, moving from Galilee toward Jerusalem, it nevertheless highlights the global implications of the Jewish Messiah's mission on earth. From the outset, Jesus is recognized as a “light of revelation to the Gentiles” (2:32). As Jesus proceeds from Galilee to Jerusalem, His conflict with the spiritual darkness of this world and the Jewish religious authorities grows more intense.

Luke's story of Jesus is a sizable work—the longest book in the New Testament—written with extreme care. Perfectionists will love Luke. He has the mind of a scientist, the pen of a poet, and the heart of an artist. Through his exquisite vocabulary he gives his reader a front-row seat. Of course, Luke didn't write merely to entertain. He wrote to accomplish two specific goals: first, to provide a concrete, factual foundation for the faith of his patron, Theophilus—and for the church at large; and second, to present Jesus to unbelievers, proving Him to be the perfect God-man who came to save all of humanity, Jew and Gentile alike.

### **“FOR YOU, MOST EXCELLENT THEOPHILUS”**

Luke dedicated his work to “most excellent Theophilus,” whose identity remains a subject of debate. The name means “one who loves God,” which might be Luke's subtle way of addressing a generic, believing reader. This is unlikely, however. The style of address is more typical of other histories written during this time, in which a chronicler gives homage to his patron. Therefore, Theophilus was probably the nickname of a specific person, such as a noteworthy Christian official who preferred to remain anonymous, either for the sake of humility or the need for safety.

Theophilus may have been among those described by Luke as “God-fearers,” Gentiles who expressed a desire to know more about the God of Scripture and who perhaps turned to their local synagogue

for instruction. Accordingly, Luke's point of view seems to be that of a Gentile walking through the doors of Jewish tradition to enter the church. He references the secular world while explaining Judaism, all the while using common Semitic expressions. He explains the geography, history, and culture of Israel without overburdening the story with details. He quotes from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. And he views all of humankind as united by a common, desperate need for a Savior.

In ancient times, some chroniclers were commissioned by wealthy patrons to research and write a history in support of a specific objective. It might be to establish one's legitimacy or suitability for leadership, or to prepare the populace for a large undertaking. In this case, it is quite possible Luke's patron cried out with the man in Mark's Gospel, "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24), and wanted to gain assurance for himself and other believers. Consequently, we find in Luke's account (including Acts) many references to faithfulness, assurance of God's love for all of humanity, the reality of Jesus' divine identity, the perseverance of faith over adversity, the triumph of truth over evil, and the inevitable expansion of the gospel throughout the world.

For the Christian, Luke's details do not lead to faith; they undergird the faith that already exists within the individual's heart. His history says, in effect, "Your faith is reasonable; here's why."

## **"THE EXACT TRUTH ABOUT THE THINGS YOU HAVE BEEN TAUGHT"**

Luke clearly understood the power of stories about "beginnings." Today, an entire television channel is dedicated to telling the stories of famous people and their humble, pre-fame, pre-success circumstances. These stories offer comfort and inspiration to those who continue to struggle, subtly suggesting that, one day, victory will come to those who do not abandon hope. These stories of humble beginnings also invite us to share in the story of success and invite us to become part of a grander future.

To tell the story of the Savior, Luke reaches far back into the pre-history of the Christ. On the surface, his prologue features an obscure priest fulfilling his duties in the temple (1:5-12); but we soon discover that the story of the Christ begins with the story of the forerunner, John the Baptizer, a story which is itself a continuation of the overarching narrative of the Old Testament. For Luke, the story of Jesus continues the story of salvation, which began in Genesis. For that reason, he

provides a genealogy of the Savior just as Jesus steps into the public arena—and that family tree extends all the way back to our universal common ancestor, Adam (3:23-38).

Throughout Luke's Gospel, we discover why a mere man should become the object of our faith, hope, and worship: His miraculous, divine conception. His humble identity with the lowest of the low. His righteousness displayed throughout His life, including His triumph over temptation and His compassion for infirmity. His intolerance of hypocrisy. His confrontation of evil. His welcoming of sinners. His obedience to the Father. His willingness to suffer on our behalf. His conquest over death. And His open invitation to His adopted brothers and sisters to become a new race of humanity. Luke painstakingly presents Jesus as a human, but one who is extraordinary, not only because of his divinity, but also because of his character.

Without diminishing the Lord's divine identity, Luke presents Jesus as the embodiment of God's concern for helpless humanity. Thanks to Luke, we know of the good Samaritan (10:25-37), the woman healed of her eighteen-year infirmity (13:10-17), the healing of a man with dropsy (14:1-6), the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin (15:1-10), the prodigal son (15:11-32), the greedy rich man and godly Lazarus (16:19-31), the healing of the ten lepers (17:11-19), Zaccheus (19:1-10), the penitent thief on the cross (23:39-43), and the faith of disillusioned believers restored on the road to Emmaus (24:13-35). He presumes his readers know only too well the realities of living in a sin-sick world, so he presents the Son of God as the Great Physician.

Luke also portrays the Son of Man as perfect, ideal humanity. The first man succumbed to temptation while surrounded by abundance. The Second Man overcame temptation in the deprivation of the wilderness (4:1-13). The first man plunged all of humanity into sin, despair, death, and decay; the Second Man, through obedience, offers all of humanity new life—abundant life, everlasting life, far beyond the reach of evil's horrific consequences. The first man—the first “son of God” (3:38)—fell from his place of honor as the bearer of God's image. The Second Man is God himself, in flesh and bone, sent to restore the former glory of humanity. His resurrection body foreshadows the image of redeemed men and women.

By the end of his work, Luke has accomplished something remarkable. By virtue of his faithful handling of eyewitness accounts and his divinely inspired writing skills, the Gospel of Luke transforms the passive reader into an impassioned eyewitness. Luke describes the man

Jesus and His ministry in vivid detail. You will crisscross the countryside with Him, meeting the people He came to save. You'll climb to the summit of Jerusalem to face down the enemies of grace. You'll endure the leather straps during His scourging and suffer the puncture of the nails at His crucifixion. You'll feel the weight of the sagging body as He slumps on the cross. You'll gasp your last breaths with Him. You'll walk with His followers into despair during the three days after His death and experience their confusion during the pandemonium of that first Easter. And you'll stand alongside them in worship as He ascends to heaven to sit by the Father.

Luke's history is no mere chronicle of a dead hero. This is His Story! The story of Christ not only continues today; it invites you to join the narrative and to help write the conclusion.



## LUKE'S PREFACE (LUKE 1:1-4)

Each of the four inspired Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—begins in a unique way. Matthew starts with a genealogy tracing the legal descent of Jesus from Abraham to Joseph, highlighting His place as heir of the Abrahamic promise and the Davidic kingship (Matt. 1:1-17). After a brief quote of an Old Testament prophecy, the Gospel of Mark drops the reader right in the middle of the action of John the Baptist's ministry . . . leading to Jesus' baptism . . . flashing through His temptation in the wilderness . . . and cutting straight to His preaching in Galilee (Mark 1:1-14). John's Gospel begins with a theologically rich "Christology from above"—a kind of hymn to the eternal Word of God, Himself God, who became man for us. Reminiscent of the powerful opening of Genesis 1, John's bold confession of the person of Christ booms and echoes like a thundering voice from on high: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1-18).

Unlike the other three accounts of Jesus' life and ministry, the Gospel of Luke kicks off not with a genealogy, an action sequence, or a piece of powerful prose; it begins instead with something like a sticky note. The opening verses read like a "transmittal letter," dedicating the following account to "most excellent Theophilus" (Luke 1:3). In this very brief preface, however, we not only learn the name of the first reader of the Gospel, but we also catch a glimpse of the standards of excellence for which the writer, Luke, strived in his research and writing of the account. Before stepping into the narrative in 1:5, let's take time to explore the kind of excellence Luke sought in His presentation of Jesus Christ in all His splendor.

### Only the Best LUKE 1:1-4

NASB

<sup>1</sup>Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things <sup>a</sup>accomplished among us, <sup>2</sup>just as

<sup>1</sup>Many people have set out to write accounts about the events that have been fulfilled among us. <sup>2</sup>They used

NLT

NASB

they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning <sup>a</sup>were eyewitnesses and <sup>b</sup>servants of the <sup>c</sup>word, <sup>3</sup>it seemed fitting for me as well, having <sup>a</sup>investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write *it* out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; <sup>4</sup>so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been <sup>a</sup>taught.

1:1 <sup>a</sup>Or on which there is full conviction 1:2 <sup>a</sup>Lit became <sup>b</sup>Or ministers <sup>c</sup>i.e. gospel 1:3 <sup>a</sup>Or followed 1:4 <sup>a</sup>Or orally instructed in

LIT

the eyewitness reports circulating among us from the early disciples.\* <sup>3</sup>Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write an accurate account for you, most honorable Theophilus, <sup>4</sup>so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught.

1:2 Greek from those who from the beginning were servants of the word.

How seldom we find true excellence. We live in an increasingly hurried and hassled society in which fewer people must generate greater output with fewer resources. The constant push for quick turnaround and instant gratification has dulled our senses and lowered our expectations. We have come to accept—and even expect—mediocrity on the job, in the marketplace, and in government. “First-rate” used to be our minimum standard; now, it is considered rude or unreasonable to ask for excellence.

Quality can’t be rushed. Unfortunately, we’re all in a hurry. And the consequences of slouching standards and slipshod work can be disastrous, even with seemingly insignificant tasks. As John Gardner wisely stated in his book *Excellence*, “The society that scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.”<sup>1</sup> Tragically, his words have proven prophetic: the cancer of mediocrity has invaded Christendom. Fewer seminaries now expect anything beyond a cursory familiarity with the original languages, and more students preparing for ministry opt for degrees with no Greek or Hebrew required. Most graduate programs compress systematic theology to fit into one or two semesters; so, with neither comprehension of orthodox doctrine nor the skills to think through the issues, we shouldn’t be surprised when Christian seminaries cease to be distinctly Christian. In recent years, a prominent Methodist seminary has added clerical training for Muslims and Jews to its curriculum to become “the first truly multi-faith American seminary.”<sup>2</sup> They also plan to add clerical training for Buddhists and Hindus.

This formerly Christian seminary did not change its stripes sud-

denly. The decision to abandon the “things [they] had been taught” (1:4) began with a small yet momentous compromise in their view of divine truth and its source. This undoubtedly followed a host of tiny compromises in both hermeneutics and theology. The journey toward irrelevance began with a decision to give mediocrity a passing grade.

The downward drag of mediocrity is not a new phenomenon. While traveling with Paul, Luke saw communities of believers scattered across the Roman Empire like a great number of pearls, each growing around its own core of oral tradition. As an educated man, Luke foresaw a particular danger looming on the horizon. As first-generation witnesses began to pass away, leaving fewer firsthand accounts of the Lord and His teaching, myths and fables would take the place of authentic stories. If the churches were to survive this erosion, they would need a unified, comprehensive story of Christ to bind them together. They needed a copiously researched and ruthlessly verified account that would equip them to separate truth from fiction and to remain distinctly Christian. They needed an excellent Gospel.

When the Holy Spirit compelled Luke to write, He drew upon Luke’s affinity for meticulous accuracy. Luke’s extraordinary devotion to excellence took four distinct forms:

- Excellence in Research
- Excellence in Organization
- Excellence in Expression
- Excellence in Discipline

### — 1:1-2 —

*Excellence in research.* During Luke’s travels with Paul, he encountered a patchwork of oral traditions preserved in the memories of aging saints who knew Jesus personally. Many had likely written informal memories on scraps of parchment and papyrus. As he traveled with Paul, gathering these scraps of written tradition and perhaps recording his own interviews with eyewitnesses, Luke felt the Holy Spirit’s prompting to write a more excellent account.

He did not merely paste the pieces together to form a composite document. Luke scrupulously checked his facts. The Greek term translated “eyewitnesses” (1:2) derives from the term we transliterate “autopsy” and is not found anywhere else in the Bible—neither the Greek translation of the Old Testament nor the New Testament. It is a term used often, however, by historians such as Josephus, Herodotus, and Polybius. In

ancient cultures, no evidence carried more weight than the testimony of a reputable eyewitness.

Luke interviewed the people who knew Jesus best. He spent time with the people who saw Him eat, heard Him snore, and inhaled His odor on a hot afternoon. They had been present when His ministry unfolded. A few had marveled at His transfiguration. They had witnessed His agony in Gethsemane, His writhing under the torturous scourge, and His torment on the cross. And they thrilled to see Him alive again. Luke diligently scrutinized his sources to weed out specious material, fill in missing details, correct errors, and even disclose previously unknown events. And only then, when he had assembled and vetted all the material he could find, did he begin to write.

— 1:3 —

*Excellence in organization.* A good historian does not merely assemble facts and then string them together. A good historian tells a story, usually for a specific purpose. He or she must choose which information to include and what data to leave out. Then the historian must organize and arrange the facts to paint an accurate, compelling, memorable, and useful picture of what occurred.

The term rendered “investigated” literally means “to follow along” or “to accompany.” In addition to the important task of checking the details, Luke traced the story of Jesus from the beginning to its conclusion to see the mission and work of Christ as a whole. Only when viewing the total can one begin to appreciate the wonder of it all.

The phrase rendered “in consecutive order” (NASB) could be misleading. Luke did not do away with chronological order altogether in his history of Jesus, but he didn’t use it as his main organizing principle either. A better translation might be “in an orderly sequence” (cf. the renderings in the NLT, NIV, and ESV). Ancient people did not obsess over time like we do today. Luke’s overarching arrangement of the individual episodes of the Lord’s life follows a geographical sequence, which ancient readers would have accepted without question.

*Excellence in expression.* Throughout the narrative, Luke’s grammar and syntax compares very favorably with the best examples of Greek literature in his day. Moreover, his storytelling ability is nothing short of genius. He employed several marvelously sophisticated literary devices, not only to inform his reading (and listening) audiences, but also to occasionally entertain them.

Luke could have presented the facts—and only the tedious facts—in

chronological order; instead, he crafted a compelling narrative that conveys the beauty, irony, complexity, excitement, and pathos of God coming to earth to save the world from sin. And it's a good thing he did. As my mentor, Howard Hendricks, often said to his teachers-in-training: "It's a *sin* to make the Bible seem boring!"

### — 1:4 —

*Excellence in discipline.* Despite Luke's careful attention to detail and his artful use of language, he never lost sight of his primary purpose: "so that you (Theophilus [and those for whom this history was commissioned]) may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught." Luke's travels with Paul impressed upon him the perilous future that Christianity would face without an excellent record—an infallible, inerrant, wholly trustworthy account—of the Lord's life, teachings, and work. He understood that sound theology, like a house, must stand upon the solid rock of truth (cf. 6:46-49). Without an accurate and reliable account of what Jesus taught and what He did on our behalf, believers have no basis for their beliefs. After all, faith separated from divine truth will shift with the prevailing winds of popular opinion and collapse when battered by the storms of adversity.

To make matters worse, Theophilus and all these "God-lovers" lived during a time when the beginnings of a movement known as Gnosticism threatened to warp Christian doctrine just as it had begun to distort Judaism, pagan religions, and even Greek philosophy. Those who knew Christ personally and had witnessed His resurrection would soon die, and with them, firsthand knowledge of Christian truth would cease. Any vacuum of information left after their passing would soon be filled with myths and fables.

Sure enough, it was not long after the production of John, the last of our four Gospels, that Gnostic writings telling bizarre stories about Jesus began to circulate. This occurred as early as the second century. Fortunately, Luke had prepared an excellent history of Jesus and the church He commissioned. Luke saw the random collections of unverified anecdotes about Jesus as building materials—useless until assembled to build a house—and he erected a house large enough for all believers, Jew and Gentile alike, and sturdy enough to endure through the ages.

Truth has become a slippery subject in these latter days. Post-modernism denies the existence of truth, so it is not surprising that

postmodern Christians see no difference between disagreement and hostility. Consequently, they quickly set aside truth to avoid disharmony, particularly with people of different belief systems. I find this attitude confusing and appalling. I can think of few gifts more precious or costly than the gift of truth, especially when knowing the truth will help someone avoid unnecessary difficulty, illness, sorrow, grief—or worse, eternal separation from God! I agree with Martin Luther, who wrote,

Elegant and true is the sentiment which Aristotle expresses in the First Book of his *Ethics* (chapter 4): that it is better to stand by the truth than to show too much favor to those who are our close friends or even our relatives. And to do this is distinctly becoming to a philosopher. For while both the truth and our friends are dear to us, truth should enjoy the preferred place. If, then, a man [like Aristotle] who is a heathen holds that this should be done in civil disputes, how much more should it be done in matters which have the clear testimony of Scripture in their favor, so that we do not place the authority of men before Scripture! For men can be deceived, but the Word of God is itself the wisdom of God and the most certain truth. It will be the truth as I understand it, even at the risk of hurting a relationship.<sup>3</sup>

To set aside excellence in the pursuit of what is factual and real might make things easier in the short run. But to set aside truth for the sake of harmony with people means sacrificing something of far greater importance: harmony with God, the Author of truth. Luke pursued the truth with excellence, and the Holy Spirit kept him from error. And for nearly two millennia, the Lord has preserved this excellent, orderly account for us, so that we may have certainty about our trust in God's Son—what He taught and what He did on our behalf. With this long history of excellence behind us, let's not settle for mediocrity now! Let us, instead, boldly and lovingly proclaim what we know to be factual and true. After all, real and lasting harmony between people depends upon our acknowledging and embracing truth together.

## APPLICATION: LUKE 1:1-4

### Excellence as unto the Lord

Luke set a wonderful example of excellence when writing his orderly history of the Christ (The Gospel of Luke) and His church (The Acts of the Apostles). He explains his motivation in the opening lines of his dedication to “most excellent Theophilus,” from which we can glean a few principles.

*Excellence honors God.* Be careful not to turn that statement into a battle cry for perfectionism, which merely gratifies self. But pursue excellence in everything.

*Excellence stands the test of time.* Luke wanted to create something that would serve the needs of endless generations to come and withstand intense scrutiny. Others had attempted to document the Lord’s life, but none except the Gospel of Mark had endured (1:1).<sup>4</sup> Two thousand years later, Luke’s Gospel hasn’t lost its original beauty.

*Excellence today honors the legacy it has inherited.* Luke recognized his responsibility to steward what had been handed down to him by “those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word” (1:2). By their excellent handling of the truth, he became a child of God, and with their passing, others would look to him.

*Excellence recognizes what is valuable and takes care to preserve it.* Luke accepted that he had a responsibility to handle the “exact truth” with utmost care (1:4). He treated the story of Christ like a priceless heirloom and preserved it for those who would come after him.

*Excellence pays attention to details.* Luke “investigated everything carefully from the beginning” and then arranged the facts in orderly sequence (1:3). He scrupulously and meticulously verified every scrap of information by tracing each detail to its original, eyewitness source. His travels with Paul gave him unprecedented access to the who’s who of Christian prehistory. Still, it was a significant undertaking that would have required painstaking organization to catalog and organize the data.

*Excellence recognizes its duty to the welfare of others.* Luke appreciated the fact that Theophilus (and the church at large) looked to his work for greater stability in their faith (1:4). While it is the Holy Spirit who draws people to the Father through Christ and who preserves their faith, the excellent work of His servants often becomes His means.

While His use of Luke's work is special,<sup>5</sup> He nonetheless uses the excellent work of all His servants to build and strengthen His church.

Each day, as you fight traffic, when you put in overtime, while you dutifully grind out the tasks that have been assigned to you—no matter how obscure or thankless—let excellence guide your every effort. If you are a plumber, plumb with excellence. If you are an attorney, don't merely fill out forms; approach every case with ingenuity and integrity. Regardless of your profession, let your professionalism attract others to Christ. If you are a musician, practice, even if you have it down. If you are a homemaker, make hospitality, economy, efficiency, kindness, and orderliness your profession.

Let excellence become your trademark.

For daily inspiration, here are some key passages you might consider posting near your workspace:

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.  
(Eccl. 9:10)

Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:31)

We have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men. (2 Cor. 8:21)

With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free. (Eph. 6:7-8)

Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world. (Phil. 2:14-15)

Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. (Col. 3:17)

Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. (Col. 3:23-24)

Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because

of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation. (1 Pet. 2:12)

Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet. 4:11)