

# KEY WORD

## KNOWING FOR SURE

Volume 1 (Chapters 1–10)

A 13-LESSON STUDY

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REFORMED EXPOSITORY  
BIBLE STUDY

**JON NIELSON**

and **PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN**

**LUKE**

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**JON NIELSON**  
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P U B L I S H I N G  
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## SERIES INTRODUCTION

Studying the Bible will change your life. This is the consistent witness of Scripture and the experience of people all over the world, in every period of church history.

King David said, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps. 19:7–8). So anyone who wants to be wiser and happier, and who wants to feel more alive, with a clearer perception of spiritual reality, should study the Scriptures.

Whether we study the Bible alone or with other Christians, it will change us from the inside out. The Reformed Expository Bible Studies provide tools for biblical transformation. Written as a companion to the Reformed Expository Commentary, this series of short books for personal or group study is designed to help people study the Bible for themselves, understand its message, and then apply its truths to daily life.

Each Bible study is introduced by a pastor-scholar who has written a full-length expository commentary on the same book of the Bible. The individual chapters start with the summary of a Bible passage, explaining **The Big Picture** of this portion of God’s Word. Then the questions in **Getting Started** introduce one or two of the passage’s main themes in ways that connect to life experience. These questions may be especially helpful for group leaders in generating lively conversation.

Understanding the Bible’s message starts with seeing what is actually there, which is where **Observing the Text** comes in. Then the Bible study provides a longer and more in-depth set of questions entitled **Understanding the Text**. These questions carefully guide students through the entire passage, verse by verse or section by section.



It is important not to read a Bible passage in isolation, but to see it in the wider context of Scripture. So each Bible study includes two **Bible Connections** questions that invite readers to investigate passages from other places in Scripture—passages that add important background, offer valuable contrasts or comparisons, and especially connect the main passage to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The next section is one of the most distinctive features of the Reformed Expository Bible Studies. The authors believe that the Bible teaches important doctrines of the Christian faith, and that reading biblical literature is enhanced when we know something about its underlying theology. The questions in **Theology Connections** identify some of these doctrines by bringing the Bible passage into conversation with creeds and confessions from the Reformed tradition, as well as with learned theologians of the church.

Our aim in all of this is to help ordinary Christians apply biblical truth to daily life. **Applying the Text** uses open-ended questions to get people thinking about sins that need to be confessed, attitudes that need to change, and areas of new obedience that need to come alive by the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. Finally, each study ends with a **Prayer Prompt** that invites Bible students to respond to what they are learning with petitions for God's help and words of praise and gratitude.

You will notice boxed quotations throughout the Bible study. These quotations come from one of the volumes in the Reformed Expository Commentary. Although the Bible study can stand alone and includes everything you need for a life-changing encounter with a book of the Bible, it is also intended to serve as a companion to a full commentary on the same biblical book. Reading the full commentary is especially useful for teachers who want to help their students answer the questions in the Bible study at a deeper level, as well as for students who wish to further enrich their own biblical understanding.

The people who worked together to produce this series of Bible studies have prayed that they will engage you more intimately with Scripture, producing the kind of spiritual transformation that only the Bible can bring.

Philip Graham Ryken  
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series  
Author of *Luke* (REC)

## INTRODUCING LUKE

Luke is the third and longest of the biblical Gospels. Its **main purpose** is to provide a true and orderly account of Christ's life, ministry, sufferings, death, and resurrection so that people who read the book "may have certainty concerning the things" (Luke 1:4) that it teaches about the Savior who came "to seek and to save the lost" (19:10). In other words, the gospel of Luke was written to strengthen our faith in Jesus and to give us greater assurance of the salvation he brings.

"The Gospel of Knowing for Sure," as we might call it, is named for the man who wrote it: "Luke the beloved physician" (Col. 4:14). Dr. Luke, who accompanied the apostle Paul on some of his famous missionary journeys, happens to be the only New Testament **author** who was not a Jew but a Greek. His careful attention to detail, tender compassion for people who suffer, and evident fascination with healing miracles all reflect his calling to the medical profession. Like many good Christian doctors, Luke was an everyday evangelist who wanted everyone he met to know more about Jesus. A gifted historian as well as a skilled physician, he penned not one but two best sellers—the New Testament book of Acts also bears his signature. In his gospel, Luke wrote down "all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). Then, in the book of Acts, he told the rest of the story, portraying the good news of Jesus Christ being proclaimed all over the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Luke addressed both his gospel and its sequel to a person whom he calls "most excellent Theophilus" (Luke 1:3; see also Acts 1:1). Because he is given this honorific title ("most excellent"), some notable scholars maintain that Theophilus was a high-ranking Roman official. Since Luke's purpose behind what he wrote to Theophilus was to give greater assurance concerning the truth about Jesus, presumably this important leader was at

least somewhat familiar with Christianity but wanted to learn more. Others believe that Luke wrote for Theophilus the son of Ananias, who became high priest in Jerusalem several years after Jesus died and rose again. But even though he was writing to a specific individual, Luke also had a more general **audience** in mind. The name *Theophilus* means “friend of God” or “lover of God.” If we are friends of God through our loving faith in Jesus Christ, then this gospel was written for us as much as it was written for anyone.

Our understanding of Luke’s audience makes a difference regarding how we understand the book’s **context**. Was Luke writing to a Jew or a Gentile? To a religious leader in Jerusalem or to a Roman official in a city like Antioch—or even Rome itself? When we read this gospel, we discover that Luke provides sufficient information about daily life in ancient Galilee and religious customs in biblical Jerusalem for us to be able to understand Christ’s life and ministry within their original setting.

Luke begins his account of Christ’s public ministry with Jesus’s first sermon, which he preached at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. The book’s **key verse** comes from Jesus’s quotation from the Old Testament book of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19; cf. Isa. 61:1–2). Once he had read these words aloud, Jesus sat down and calmly said, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). By saying this, he was claiming to be the Savior whom God had always promised to send—the one who would preach good news to poor sinners and would bring healing for every wound and freedom from every form of bondage. As the rest of the gospel story unfolds, we will see Jesus actively carry out the exact kind of ministry that Isaiah foretold—one that was “mighty in deed and word” (24:19). He will heal the sick, give sight to the blind, set captives free from spiritual bondage, and—most of all—preach the good news of forgiveness for sin.

Many scholars have identified spiritual themes and specific episodes within the life of Christ that are unique to Luke’s gospel. Luke gives us the fullest account of Jesus’s birth and boyhood—one that includes four of the first Christmas carols. Of the gospel writers, he provides the most complete record of the healing ministry that Jesus exhibited as the Great

Physician. He tells more stories about forgiveness and places a special focus on prayer—eleven of the fifteen prayers of Jesus that are recorded in the Bible are included in Luke’s gospel. He also retells nearly twenty parables about the kingdom of God that do not appear in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, or John—including many that deal with the stewardship of money and treat it as an important spiritual issue. And he takes special notice of the women who supported Jesus and were blessed by his ministry.<sup>1</sup>

As we encounter these varied episodes from the life of Christ, what **theological themes** can we discern within Luke’s gospel? By providing the fullest account of our Savior’s nativity—which includes the beautiful songs that men, women, and angels sang to celebrate his miraculous birth in Bethlehem—this gospel helps us to understand the mystery of the *incarnation*. Luke’s down-to-earth presentation of the life of Christ generally emphasizes our Savior’s humanity. But, paradoxically, his favorite title for Jesus—“Son of Man”—is an Old Testament term that bears witness to his deity.

Luke has even more to say about the death of Christ than he does about the birth of Christ. As do the other gospels, this one pays disproportionate attention to the last week of our Savior’s life, when unrelenting opposition to his ministry intensified his sufferings and resulted in his bloody crucifixion. Luke wants us to understand the doctrine of the *atonement*—the truth that, by dying in our place, Jesus paid the price of our sins and reconciled us to God.

We should also see Luke as a theologian of the Holy Spirit—especially when we take into account the second part of his two-volume masterpiece: the book of Acts. The good doctor was interested in what theologians call *pneumatology*: the study of the person and work of the third member of the Trinity. From the moment he was baptized in the Jordan River through the moment he walked out of the empty tomb, Jesus was empowered by the Holy Spirit.

One more area to mention that Luke’s theology encompasses is *missiology*, which relates to the church’s calling to proclaim the gospel to the

1. In order to maximize the time we spend on some of the passages and episodes that are unique to Luke’s gospel and tied to these central themes, this study will not include an in-depth examination of *every* passage in the book. At times, you will be encouraged to read some sections of his gospel without answering specific questions about them.

whole world. During his life on earth, Jesus preached the good news to as many needy people as he could: poor shepherds, lonely widows, crooked businessmen, despised lepers, and foreigners who were outside the family of faith. As he reached out to people who were lost, Jesus was beginning to fulfill the prophecy that had been issued at his birth that he would bring salvation to “all peoples”—to Gentiles as well as to Jews (2:31; see also 32). This work would continue through his disciples, whom he commissioned to preach “repentance for the forgiveness of sins . . . to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (24:47).

Every aspect of Luke’s theology is designed not only to give us greater certainty about Christ’s saving work but also to draw us deeper into the life of costly Christian discipleship. The most important **practical application** of his gospel we can make is simply to trust its message of salvation and to believe in Jesus. But that is not Luke’s only objective for us: he also wants us to take up our crosses and follow Jesus.

One of Luke’s favorite literary and pastoral techniques is to set two characters in contrast in order to demonstrate the true and best way to follow Jesus. Luke gives us two dinner guests, Simon and a sinful woman, along with opposite assessments of their spiritual condition (see 7:36–50); two sisters, Mary and Martha, who take different postures toward spiritual instruction (see 10:38–42); two brothers, younger and older, who were both far from their father’s heart—but in very different ways (see 15:11–32); two neighbors from two different tax brackets, the rich man and poor Lazarus, who reached totally different eternal destinations (16:19–31); two men who went to the temple to pray, a Pharisee and a tax collector—only one of whom had a right standing with God (18:9–14); and so on.

True Christian disciples care for the same kinds of people whom Jesus treated with compassion. And if our Savior was both a healer of the body and a physician of the soul, then we too are called both to meet the material needs of our neighbors and to share the good news that may lead them to eternal life. By showing us how completely Jesus transformed the lives of the people he saved—how he liberated many people who were marginalized, oppressed, and underprivileged—Luke helps us to see the social implications of the gospel. The Savior whose miracles demonstrated his power over demons, disease, death, and the devil also calls us to see salvation in all its dimensions and to seek the lost by becoming the friends of sinners.

The gospel of Luke is not some tightly organized treatise but an evangelistic biography that tells many different stories about Jesus. Simply by reading the book from beginning to end, we get drawn into the narrative flow of the birth, life, ministry, sufferings, death, and triumphant resurrection of Jesus. But Luke also leaves us some clues to the fact that he has given careful thought to his book's structure. A crucial moment comes near the end of chapter 9, where Luke tells us that "when the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem" (v. 51). From that point forward, Christ resolutely set his course toward the cross.

The overall movement of the book is also indicated by Jesus's statement of purpose to Zacchaeus the tax collector: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). We see Jesus *seeking* the lost from the beginning of his public ministry, when he seeks out his first disciples and begins preaching the good news of the kingdom to the lost souls of Israel. The stories we see in chapter 15 about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons are really about his loving pursuit of every lost sinner. By the end of Luke's gospel we also see Jesus *saving* the lost—specifically by dying for their sins and rising again. We catch an early glimpse of this saving work when he tells Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house" (19:9). And his salvation is more fully displayed on the cross, when he welcomes the thief who is dying on the cross next to him into paradise (see 23:32–43). As we read these gospel stories, Jesus is looking to find us, too—and then to save us forever.

With these key moments in mind, here is one helpful way for us to **outline** the gospel of Luke:

Prologue: Luke's Purpose (1:1–4)

The Advent of the Son of Man

Birth of Jesus (1:5–2:21)

Boyhood of Jesus (2:22–52)

Baptism of Jesus (3:1–38)

Temptation of Jesus (4:1–13)

The Ministry of the Son of Man

Jesus Begins His Ministry (4:14–44)

Jesus Calls His Disciples (5:1–6:16)

Jesus Teaches and Performs Miracles (6:17–8:56)

Jesus Commissions His Disciples (9:1–50)

The Mission of the Son of Man on his Way to the Cross

Jesus in Samaria (9:51–10:37)

Jesus in Bethany and Judea (10:38–13:21)

Jesus Journeys to Jerusalem (13:22–17:10)

Jesus between Samaria and Galilee (17:11–18:34)

Jesus near Jericho (18:35–19:27)

The Death of the Son of Man

Triumphal Entry (19:28–44)

Temple Discourses (19:45–21:38)

Last Supper (22:1–38)

Betrayal, Arrest, and Trials (22:39–23:25)

Crucifixion and Burial (23:26–56)

The Triumph of the Son of Man

Resurrection Day (24:1–49)

Ascension Day (24:50–53)

Philip Graham Ryken

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## LESSON 1

# THE FORERUNNER

Luke 1:1–25

### THE BIG PICTURE

Luke’s gospel begins with introductory remarks that are addressed to “Theophilus”—most likely a wealthy patron of Luke as well as of the ministry of the gospel in the first century (1:3). The name itself means “lover of God,” however, and in that sense is widely applicable (perhaps intentionally so) to anyone who reads Luke’s gospel with a desire to be more “certain” of the things they have heard (and believed) about God’s Son, Jesus Christ (1:4). That is precisely Luke’s stated purpose for writing this gospel: he writes as a historian and carefully records the *historical facts* that have been gathered from eyewitnesses about what Jesus Christ did and taught (1:1–2). But Luke’s fact-based account is not without spiritual purpose; he wants Theophilus, and all lovers of God, to know for sure that everything he reports about Jesus is true—as well as consistent with what they have already been taught about him (1:4).

The remainder of the passage you will study in this lesson portrays the birth account of John the Baptist—the promised forerunner of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The angel Gabriel comes to a priest named Zechariah and announces that God will grant a son to his barren wife, Elizabeth (1:5–17). Massive promises accompany the announcement of the child’s birth—promises that are linked with Old Testament predictions about the coming of a prophet who would be like Elijah and would, by the power of the Holy Spirit, announce the coming salvation of God. Zechariah, however,



initially responds to this with doubt rather than faith; he is then rendered mute until the eventual birth of his promised son, John (1:18–25). By God’s grace, and despite Zechariah’s doubts, the child is born—the one who will come in the prophetic mold of Elijah to announce the coming of God’s own Son: Jesus the Messiah.

**Read Luke 1:1–25.**

## GETTING STARTED

1. What kinds of questions or critiques have you heard concerning the historicity of biblical accounts and the accuracy of Scripture? Which of these questions seem to be legitimate? How might others of these critiques, however, simply be serving to mask a resistance, on the part of those who raise them, to confronting the Bible’s claims?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What role have struggles with *doubt* played in your Christian journey? When you have experienced times of doubt, what has helped you to strengthen your faith in God and his Word?

### **The Ultimate Salvation, pg. 23**

When Gabriel appeared and started talking about the spirit and power of Elijah, about turning the hearts of fathers to their children, and about getting people ready for God, he was announcing the ultimate salvation. These promises were for the ministry of Zechariah’s son, but they went beyond John the Baptist to proclaim the coming of the Christ.



## UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

6. Why has Luke written this gospel, and to whom is it addressed (1:1–4)? What is his stated aim regarding Theophilus—and presumably all his readers?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. How should Luke’s introduction to his gospel shape your reading and study of it? What conclusions should you draw about what Luke will include in the book—and about what he might choose to leave out of it?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. What does Luke tell us about Zechariah and Elizabeth as he first introduces them to us (1:5–7)? What makes them examples of godly believers who are emerging from the time of the Old Testament?

### **The Good Historian, pg. 7**

Luke was a good historian. He did not write some fanciful account of things that people wanted to believe about Jesus, but an accurate historical record of what Jesus actually did. Through the testimony of Luke and others, the things that Jesus accomplished are as well established as any fact of ancient history, and this provides a rational basis for our faith.

9. The angel Gabriel links the coming child, John the Baptist, to the prophet Elijah (1:17). What do they have in common? How else will Zechariah's son act on behalf of God's people, according to what Gabriel says in 1:13–17?
  
10. What might have been the cause of the doubt that Zechariah expresses at Gabriel's words (1:18)? How does God discipline Zechariah in response—and what might he be teaching him by doing so (1:19–20)?
  
11. How does this passage conclude—and what does its conclusion reveal about the gracious heart God has for Zechariah and Elizabeth as well as for his people, Israel (1:24–25)? What do we learn about God's plan as he prepares for this great moment in salvation history?

### BIBLE CONNECTIONS

12. Read John's introduction to his own gospel (John 1:1–18). In what way is his introduction different from the introduction to Luke's gospel? What would you say is John's main *emphasis* as he introduces Jesus—and then John the Baptist—to his readers?

13. The final words of the Old Testament—which were followed by four hundred years without any new revelation from God—come to us in Malachi 4:5–6. Read those verses now. What emotions would this prophecy have stirred up in the hearts of God’s faithful people? In what clear ways do you see Gabriel’s words to Zechariah echoing these verses?

### THEOLOGY CONNECTIONS

14. One of the early heresies that plagued the church of the first century was *Gnosticism*—a system of belief that deplored the physical world as being evil while pursuing a higher form of saving knowledge (which could be attained regardless of how one sinned with one’s physical body). In what way does Luke’s historical, fact-based approach to telling the story of Jesus indicate that such a theory is mistaken? Why is it so important to believe that Jesus Christ came to earth in the *flesh*—that he lived as one who is fully God and fully human?
  
15. The Westminster Confession of Faith affirms that a Christian “believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein” (14.2). What aspects of this standard does Zechariah at first fail to meet? Why is belief in God’s Word a good indication of true, saving faith?

## APPLYING THE TEXT

16. How can Luke's approach to writing this gospel serve to strengthen your faith in God and your confidence in the historicity of the Bible's accounts?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
17. When we take Gabriel's words about John the Baptist seriously—and take the salvation of God, to which John will point, seriously as well—how will this shape our understanding of, and response to, the coming of Jesus Christ? In what way does this passage help your appreciation for the gospel to grow?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
18. How can Zechariah's temporary lack of faith in God's Word serve as a negative example that drives you to have a deeper trust in all that God promises to you? Which of the promises God has made to you in Christ are you most prone to doubt—and why?

### **Taking God at His Word, pg. 27**

This is what God always wants from us: faith. He wants us to take him at his word. So whatever God says, believe it! He has said that Jesus died and rose again, so believe in the crucifixion and the resurrection. He has said that he will forgive anyone who comes to him trusting in Jesus; so if you are a sinner, believe in Jesus and know that your sins are forgiven.

## PRAYER PROMPT

As you come to the end of your first study within the gospel of Luke, begin your prayer by thanking God for the fact that he has acted in history—at real times and in real places—for the eternal good of sinful people in need. Praise him for Luke’s “orderly” account, which focuses on the facts of what God’s Son did and said in both time and space. Finally, pray that God would give you both an ever-deepening faith in his Word and his promises as well as the eternal hope of life and forgiveness that is yours through your faith in his Son, Jesus Christ the Messiah.