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KNOWING FOR SURE

Luke 1:1–4

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, 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, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

(Luke 1:1–4)

oubt. Little by little, it gnaws away at the soul. To be sure, there are times when Christianity makes all the sense in the world. The mysteries of the birth, death, and resurrection of God the Son appear so certain that it would seem foolish even to call them into question. Yet there are also times when, as the poet Roger White so aptly put it, “A mosquito buzzes round my faith”—the mosquito of doubt.¹ In

1. Roger White, *One Bird—One Cage—One Flight: Homage to Emily Dickinson* (Happy Camp, CA: Naturegraph, 1983).

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solitary moments the nagging questions whine in our ears: Is the Bible really true? Does God actually hear my prayers? Can my sins truly be forgiven? Will I definitely go to heaven when I die?

Sometimes the doubting questions can lead to unbelief. In the opening chapter of his novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, John Updike describes the moment when a Presbyterian minister abandons the Christian faith. Doubt had been buzzing away at the man's soul, and then one day his faith vanished altogether. As Updike tells it,

The Reverend Clarence Arthur Wilmot, down in the rectory of the Fourth Presbyterian Church at the corner of Straight Street and Broadway, felt the last particles of his faith leave him. The sensation was distinct—a visceral surrender, a set of dark sparkling bubbles escaping upward. . . . His thoughts had slipped with quicksilver momentum into the recognition, which he had long withstood, that . . . there is no . . . God, nor should there be.

Clarence's mind was like a many-legged, wingless insect that had long and tediously been struggling to climb up the walls of a slick-walled porcelain basin; and now a sudden impatient wash of water swept it down into the drain. *There is no God.*²

Even if we ourselves have not abandoned the Christian faith, we can understand how this could happen. We too have had our doubts. There are times when our faith falters, when the whole story of salvation suddenly seems quite improbable, if not impossible. We still believe in Jesus, but sometimes it is hard to know for sure.

LUKE, THE HISTORIAN

So Luke decided to write a Gospel. Knowing that people sometimes have their doubts about Jesus Christ, and that even believers may struggle to gain greater assurance of their faith, he sat down to write “the Gospel of knowing for sure.” He began with a formal dedication:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to

2. John Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 5–6.

us, 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, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.
(Luke 1:1–4)

Although Luke does not mention himself by name, he has always been universally acknowledged as the writer of this book. In one long sentence, he tells us what kind of book he wanted to write: one that would help people to be more certain of their salvation in Christ. To accomplish this goal, he set out to write a historically accurate, carefully researched, and well-organized Gospel.

Luke is exactly such a Gospel. First, it is historically accurate. Luke was by no means the only person ever to write a biography of Jesus Christ. He was well aware that others had tried to record what Jesus had done. As he said, “Many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us” (Luke 1:1). Perhaps he was thinking of the Gospel of Mark, which has many similarities to Luke, and which Luke may well have used as one of his sources. But the word “many” indicates that there were other writings as well, including works that may no longer be in existence.

In mentioning what others had written, Luke was not trying to be critical. He gives no indication that he considered the other writings to be unreliable in any way. In fact, he says just the opposite. Others wrote down what they had received from “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” (Luke 1:2), by which Luke meant the apostles. From the book of Acts, which is the sequel to this Gospel, we know that apostles like Peter and John were called to be witnesses for Christ (e.g., Acts 1:8; 4:33). What qualified them to preach the gospel was the fact that they were eyewitnesses of the risen Christ.

But eventually the apostolic gospel had to be written down. The apostles would not be around forever, and if their mission was to continue, their message needed to be handed down in a more permanent form. Others had begun to preserve the apostolic witness in writing, but Luke wanted to do it too. God had called him to write a Gospel that was similar to what others had written, but would also make a unique contribution. Partly drawing on the work of others, but also pursuing his own historical and evangelistic

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interests, Luke would write a more complete history, so that people would know for sure what Jesus had done.

Luke defined a Gospel as “a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us” (Luke 1:1). A narrative is simply a story, so Luke wanted to tell a story. But this particular narrative was historical. It was about things that had been accomplished, things that had really happened, things that had been done in time and space. Therefore, Luke is careful to place the story of Jesus in its historical context. For example, when he tells the story of the Savior’s birth, he says that it coincided with “the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Luke 2:2). Luke was writing fact, not fiction, and he knew the difference, as did his original readers. Like Polybius, the Greek historian of Rome, he wanted to “simply record what really happened and what really was said.”³ In addition, as we shall see, he wanted to give a divinely inspired interpretation of the words and deeds of Jesus Christ.

During the nineteenth century, liberal Bible scholars tried to argue that Luke was a bad historian, that his books were riddled with factual errors. In the last one hundred years, however, their assessment of Luke’s historiography has been almost completely reversed. The more we learn about the ancient world, the more we see how careful he was to get the facts straight. One historian concludes: “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.”⁴ In the words of the famous archaeologist William Ramsay, “Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy; he is possessed of the true historic sense; he seizes the important and critical events and shows their true nature at greater length, while he touches lightly or omits entirely much that was valueless for his purpose. In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.”⁵

Doubtless some scholars will continue to challenge Luke on historical grounds. But his concern for historical accuracy helps us to be more certain

3. Polybius, quoted in Clinton E. Arnold, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, vol. 1, *Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 322.

4. Otto Piper, “The Purpose of Luke,” *Union Seminary Review* 67.1 (Nov. 1945), 16.

5. William Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 222.

of our faith. If it could be shown that Luke’s work contained basic errors of fact, then his whole Gospel would be discredited. A Christian is someone who believes that Jesus is who he said he is and did what the Bible says he did. But if Luke didn’t have his facts straight on the governorship of Syria, how can we trust his testimony about miracles like the virgin birth or the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ? Our entire salvation depends on the things that Jesus accomplished in human history, specifically through his sufferings and death.

Fortunately, 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. Of course, we still have to accept that what the Gospel says is true. We have to put our own personal trust in Jesus, believing that he died on the cross for our sins and that he was raised again to give us eternal life. But we believe these things with good reason, knowing that they are based on reliable history.

JUST THE FACTS

In order to write a book that was historically accurate, Luke had to do painstaking research. This is a second feature of his Gospel: it was carefully researched. This required someone with a scholarly temperament, and Luke was just the man for the job. We sense this from his literary style. Listen again to his dedication:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, 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, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.
(Luke 1:1–4)

Who would begin a book with a word like “inasmuch” or write in such an elevated style? Only a man of letters—a highly educated, cultured, and

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sophisticated writer. Luke's preface compares favorably to the formal introductions we find in works by Herodotus, Thucydides, Josephus, and other ancient historians. By way of comparison, consider this passage from the introduction Thucydides gave to his famous *History of the Peloponnesian War*: "But as to the facts of the occurrences of the war, I have thought it my duty to give them, not as ascertained from any chance informant, nor as seemed to me probable, but only after investigating with the greatest possible accuracy each detail, in the case of both the events in which I myself participated and of those regarding which I got my information from others. And the endeavor to discover these facts was a laborious task."⁶ Like Thucydides, Luke was writing in the grand style, which was appropriate for a sophisticated audience across the Greek-speaking world.

For all his literary skill, Luke was not an eyewitness to the events he describes in his book. He admits this from the outset, honestly distinguishing his own work from those "who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" (Luke 1:2). Luke was not an apostle. Nevertheless, he was a close companion of the apostles, and it seemed good for him to write a Gospel. He wrote on the basis of the testimony he received from the apostles, and he wrote as one who had "followed all things closely for some time past" (Luke 1:3).

What was Luke's background? His name is Greek, which means that he may have been a Gentile. This would explain why he wrote a book presenting Jesus as the Savior of the world—a Gospel for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. What we do know is that Luke was medically trained. At the end of Colossians, he is described as "the beloved physician" (Col. 4:14). We also know that he traveled with the apostle Paul. In addition to Colossians, he is mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:11 and Philemon 24, where Paul calls him a "fellow worker," and perhaps also in 2 Corinthians 8:18, where Paul mentions "the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel." There are further hints of Luke's partnership with Paul in Acts. Starting with chapter 16, parts of that book are written in the first person plural. For example, the author writes: "we sailed away from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and in five days we came to them at Troas,

6. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (Baltimore: Penguin, 1954), 24.

where we stayed for seven days” (Acts 20:6). This seems to indicate that Luke was one of Paul’s traveling companions.

What all of this means is that Doctor Luke, as we might call him, was in an excellent position to know the truth about Jesus Christ. He could describe Christ’s work as something “accomplished among us” (Luke 1:1). He was an eyewitness of the apostolic ministry and a member of the early Christian community, and as such, he wanted to know everything there was to know about Jesus. By his own testimony, he had “followed all things closely for some time past” (Luke 1:3). Norval Geldenhuys explains how Luke must have done his work:

Through long periods (during his travels along with Paul and also at other times) he made thorough researches concerning the Gospel stories so that he was able to set forth the actual course of events. He collected and studied all available written renderings of words and works of Jesus; wherever the opportunity was presented to him he discussed the Gospel stories with persons who possessed firsthand knowledge concerning Him; and during his stay in Jerusalem and in other parts of Palestine he collected as much information as possible concerning the buildings and places connected with the history of Christ. This is all clearly evidenced by the contents of the third Gospel.⁷

If Mark was a storyteller, and John was a philosopher, then Luke was an investigative reporter. The result of his research is a rich account of the person and work of Jesus Christ. With a doctor’s gift for observation, Luke noticed things that other people overlooked. His is the most complete Gospel, which is why it is the longest book in the New Testament, including many precious details that the other Gospels omit. It is from Luke that we learn about the birth of John the Baptist and the infancy of Jesus the Christ—in all likelihood because he interviewed their mothers. It is from Luke that we learn the Christmas carols of Mary, Zechariah, Simeon, and the angel chorus of heaven. It is in Luke alone that we read parables like the good Samaritan, the prodigal son, and the Pharisee and the publican. Only Luke tells us what Jesus preached on the road to Emmaus. And only Luke

7. Norval Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 53.

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gives us fuller portraits of the women who followed Jesus: Elizabeth, Mary, Anna, and Mary and Martha.

The result of Luke's careful research is that reading his Gospel helps us to know for sure. Luke did his work with all the rigor of a prize-winning journalist, asking the famous questions: Who? What? When? Where? How? And at the back of his mind were the questions that we sometimes ask: Who is Jesus? What did he do? Did he really do what people said he did? When Luke was satisfied that he had the story straight, he wrote it down. As a careful historian, he wrote a sober, straightforward, nonsensationalized account of what Jesus did to save the world. This strengthens the assurance of our faith. The Gospel of Luke bears all the marks of authentic history, and as such, it reassures us that we are reading the real story of Jesus.

In describing how Luke came to write his Gospel, we must never forget that he wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As John MacArthur explains,

Luke's acknowledgment that he compiled his account from various extant sources does not invalidate the claim of divine inspiration for his work. The process of inspiration never bypasses or overrides the personalities, vocabularies, and styles of the human authors of Scripture. The unique traits of the human authors are always indelibly stamped on the book of Scripture. Luke's research creates no exception to this rule. The research itself was orchestrated by divine Providence.⁸

Luke was the one who did the research and the writing, but God was the one who gave us this Gospel. The work that Luke did was under the sovereign control of God's Spirit, so that the Gospel he wrote is the very Word of God. Like everything else in the Bible, it is not merely a human book about God, but a divine book to humanity. As B. B. Warfield explained,

The whole of Scripture is the product of divine activities which enter it, however, not by superseding the activities of the human authors, but confluent with them; so that the Scriptures are the joint product of divine and human activities, both of which penetrate them at every point, working harmoni-

8. John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Quick Reference Guide to the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 190.

ously together to the production of a writing which is not divine here and human there, but at once divine and human in every part, every word, every particular.⁹

GETTING ORGANIZED

One more feature of Luke’s Gospel is worthy of mention. Not only is the book historically accurate and carefully researched, but also logically organized. Luke tells us that his goal was “to write an orderly account” (Luke 1:3). Therefore, we would expect his Gospel to be organized in some careful and coherent way, and this is precisely what we find.

For the most part, the third Gospel is organized chronologically. Luke tells about things in the order they happened. However, he did not and could not tell us everything. Rather obviously, he did not have the space to report everything that Jesus ever said or did. He had to be selective. And as he chose what to include in his Gospel, he also had to decide how to arrange it. How did one event relate to the next? What was the best way to present the person and work of Jesus Christ? How should each phase of his life and ministry be connected to the story line of the gospel?

We can analyze the structure of Luke in several different ways. One good place to start is with Luke 4:17–21, where Jesus announces his intention to preach the good news and to perform liberating miracles of healing power. Or we could start with a thematic verse that aptly summarizes the book’s message. This verse comes at the end of the story of Zacchaeus, where Jesus describes his ministry: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Jesus often identified himself as “the Son of Man,” especially in the Gospel of Luke. By using this ancient title, he was declaring his authority to judge the nations, for the Son of Man was prophesied as coming for judgment (see Dan. 7:13–14). Here he announces what the Son of Man has come to do, namely, “to seek and to save the lost.” By this point Jesus had already told the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (Luke 15). Now he makes their meaning clear: he is the Savior who has come on a search-and-rescue mission.

9. Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Divine and Human in the Bible,” in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 2:547.

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This is the structure of Luke's Gospel, which is organized to show who Jesus is and what he has come to do. The opening chapters tell of Christ's coming—his birth and preparation for ministry. Then Jesus begins his public ministry, and as he goes through Israel, teaching and performing miracles, he seeks lost sinners. But Jesus came to do something more than seek; he also came to save. So Luke ends with the great saving events of the gospel: the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son of Man. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. Roughly speaking, in chapters 1 to 3 he comes; in chapters 4 to 21 he seeks; and in chapters 22 to 24 he saves.

This is a good start in understanding Luke's structure, but we can be more specific. Most scholars agree that the book has at least four major sections. The first section runs from the beginning through 4:13, at which point Jesus begins his public ministry. The opening chapters are about Christ's coming and about his preparation for ministry. A good title for them is "The *Coming* of the Son of Man."

The next section runs from Luke 4:14 to Luke 9:50. What separates this material from what comes before and after is a change of venue. In the opening chapters the Son of Man comes to the nation of Israel, but in chapter 4 he goes to Galilee in the north: "And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee" (Luke 4:14). There he remains for the next six chapters, doing some teaching, performing many miracles, and clarifying his divine identity. We may call this part of Luke "The *Ministry* of the Son of Man."

There is a significant turning point near the end of chapter 9, where Jesus moves on from Galilee. This is part of the orderliness of Luke's account. The order is not simply logical and chronological, but also geographical. Luke says of Jesus, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). From this point on, there could be no turning back. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem—the most important journey in the history of the world. Jesus was going up to the city, up to the temple, up to the cross to die. His journey runs from Luke 9:51 to Luke 19:27, where he enters Jerusalem in temporary triumph. And as he makes his way to Jerusalem, we get hints of what will happen when he gets there. As he trains his disciples, the Son of Man begins to tell them what he must suffer for the salvation of sinners (Luke 9:21–22, 43–45; 18:31–34). He also starts to face opposition from people who reject his claim to be the Christ.

Hence these chapters are about “The *Disciples* of the Son of Man,” or perhaps “The *Rejection* of the Son of Man.”

Finally the book ends with “The *Salvation* of the Son of Man”—not his own salvation, but the salvation he brings to all who trust in him. The section of Luke that runs from 19:28 to the end tells what Jesus did to save us. These are the climactic events of the Gospel: the Savior’s death on the cross, resurrection from the grave, and ascension into heaven.

THE ASSURANCE OF FAITH

Why did Luke organize his Gospel this way? As we study what Luke has written, we always want to keep his purpose in mind. Why was he so concerned about historical accuracy? Why did he do such painstaking research? Why did he arrange his Gospel so systematically? Luke tells us why at the end of his dedication: “that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4).

When Luke says “you,” he is speaking most directly to his friend Theophilus. There has been a good deal of scholarly discussion as to whether or not this man was a real person. He probably was. To be sure, a name that means “beloved of God” might well refer generally to the church of Jesus Christ. Yet the name Theophilus was common enough in those days. Furthermore, the fact that Luke refers to him as “most excellent” Theophilus suggests that he may have been a ranking official in the Roman Empire. In the book of Acts the same title is used for the Roman governor Felix (Acts 23:26). So in all likelihood, Theophilus was a real but to us otherwise unknown nobleman. Alternatively, it has been proposed that the man to whom Luke wrote may have been the high priest of Israel.¹⁰

When Luke says “you,” however, he is also speaking to us. Because Theophilus means “lover of God,” or “beloved of God,” it is the kind of name that Luke might have used to describe anyone who wants to have a relationship with God. Who is Theophilus? *You* are Theophilus, if you love God and are loved by him; therefore, Luke’s Gospel is for you.

The other main question about Theophilus concerns whether or not he was a Christian. At the very least, he knew something about Christianity.

10. Richard H. Anderson, “Theophilus: A Proposal,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 69.3 (1997): 195–215.

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In verse 4 Luke reminds Theophilus about what he had been taught. One way or another, the man had heard the basic gospel message. He had been instructed in the faith. Maybe he was a Christian, maybe not. Perhaps he was a new believer. What we know is that he did not yet have the full assurance of his faith, which is why Luke wrote him this Gospel.

Perhaps the most important word in Luke's dedication to Theophilus comes at the very end of verse 4. It is the Greek word *asphaleian*, meaning "certain," or even "infallible." The word indicates "the absolute certainty, the truthfulness of the report concerning the history of Jesus."¹¹ Luke puts this word at the end of his dedication for emphasis. This was his whole reason for writing! Theophilus knew about Jesus, but needed to know him for sure.

This is what we need as well: a sure and certain knowledge of Jesus Christ and the salvation that comes through faith in him. We need to know what Jesus accomplished. We need to know the perfection of his virgin birth, the obedience of his sinless life, the wisdom of his profound teaching, and the power of his divine miracles. We need to know these things because they prove that he is the Son of God. And we need to know what Jesus did to save us from the wrath of God. We need to know that he suffered and died on the cross for our sins. We need to know that he was raised from the dead to give eternal life to all who trust in him. And we need to know that he has ascended to heaven, where he rules over all things for the glory of God.

We need to know these things because sometimes we have our doubts. We are like the man who said to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24), or like the disciples who said, "Increase our faith!" (Luke 17:5). This is part of our struggle as fallen creatures living in a fallen world. Assurance doesn't always come right away, any more than it came right away for the apostles. We believe the gospel, but sometimes we are tempted not to, and thus we long to have greater assurance of our faith. The Westminster Confession of Faith wisely admits that "faith is different in degrees, weak or strong," and that it "may be often and many ways assailed, and weakened" (14.3). If we are sometimes tempted to have our doubts, this does not mean that we are not Christians. It simply means that we are sinners who are struggling to live by faith. But God calls us to grow in our faith, seek-

11. Geldenhuys, *Luke*, 57.

ing what the Confession calls “the attainment of a full assurance, through Christ” (14.3). As the Scripture says, we need to make our “calling and election sure” (2 Peter 1:10).

So how do we know for sure? Luke gives us the answer at the beginning of his Gospel. We do not become certain by looking at our own outstanding spiritual performance. If the assurance of our faith rested on our own ability to follow God, we could never be sure. We would always have our doubts about our obedience, or even about our faith, wondering if we were trusting God as well as we should. Nor does assurance come by going back to the moment when we first trusted in Jesus, as if our conversion experience could save us. Assurance does not come by looking within or by having some special experience. The only way we become sure of our salvation is by looking to Jesus.

This is why Luke wrote “the Gospel of knowing for sure.” He researched things carefully and wrote them down logically and accurately, giving us the real history of Jesus. He knew that like faith itself, the assurance of faith comes by hearing the gospel. So like a good doctor, he wrote a book that would heal the doubting soul.

Luke’s Gospel is for anyone who needs to know Jesus. It is for people who have never met Jesus before, and for people who need to meet him again, as if for the very first time. It is for people who aren’t quite sure about Jesus, for people who are just starting to trust in him, and for people who have known him a long time, but still need to become more secure in their faith. It is for anyone who wants to know for sure.

Do you know Jesus? Do you know him for sure? Are you so certain in your faith that you are able to live for Jesus, and even to die for him? If you want to be sure, study the Gospel of Luke and offer the prayer of the English Reformers: “Almighty God, who called Luke the Physician, whose praise is in the Gospel, to be an Evangelist, and Physician of the soul: May it please thee that, by the wholesome medicines of the doctrine delivered by him, all the diseases of our souls may be healed through the merits of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord.”¹²

12. *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662), quoted in Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Luke*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 16.