

Series Gospel of Luke

This Message Good News From Dr. Luke

Scripture Texts: Luke 1:1-4

Today I am beginning a new series of messages from the Gospel of Luke. There are 24 long chapters in this Gospel account so I will have to be selective about the passages we will focus on. There are so many good portions to think about, if I tried to cover every important passage in this Gospel account, it would be at least two years before we would reach the end of the last chapter!

There are several good reasons to study this Gospel. We focus on Luke during the Christmas season because there is more information about the birth and infancy of Jesus in Luke than in the other Gospels. Likewise, there is more information about the ascension of Jesus at the end of His time on earth. In between these bookends, there are more descriptions about Jesus in more situations than in the other Gospel accounts.

About half of the material in Luke's Gospel does not appear in the other Gospels. Luke emphasizes the many ways in which Jesus identified Himself with Jews and Gentiles. Luke's Gospel is the best of the four Gospels to help us understand how Jesus prepared His disciples for His crucifixion and also prepared them to carry on spiritual ministry after His ascension back into heaven.

Luke himself explains why he penned this Gospel in the first four verses of chapter 1.

Read Luke 1:1-4

Luke wrote his account to assure a man named Theophilus of the truth concerning some remarkable events that had happened in their lifetime. We don't know very much about Theophilus. His name indicates that he was a Gentile, not a Jew. He must have been a ranking Roman official since the phrase "most excellent" was an honorific term used when addressing important government representatives (*cf Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25*).

Theophilus had apparently received instruction in the Christian faith, but he needed assurance about the truthfulness of what he had heard. Like many other Gentiles, Theophilus undoubtedly had many questions about how God could work out His purposes through an ordinary Jewish man; about how this man could have been a miracle worker and teacher; about how God could save people through the ministry of a man who was rejected by religious leaders and whose life ended in crucifixion; about how a crucified Messiah could be the beacon of hope for both Jews and Gentiles; about all the problems that the followers of Jesus were experiencing as they proclaimed their message in the world; about the motivation and zeal and the changed lifestyles of the followers of Jesus. People who are unsure about their faith commitment to Jesus ask these same kinds of questions.

Luke wrote his Gospel to explain how the almighty God of heaven responded to the spiritual needs of humanity through Jesus. Luke wanted to make clear how Jesus had become the Savior and Redeemer of the human race and why the good news about Him needed to go out to everyone. Luke wanted to make the lifestyle that is associated with faith in Jesus abundantly clear. As Luke explained in his account, the act of faith is only the first step in a journey that affects the quality and purpose of a person's life here on earth and gives hope for eternity.

Luke was very careful and thorough in his research and writing. He wanted Theophilus to be completely confident that God was working through Jesus to fulfill His eternal plan. This document was included in the canon of Scripture because it accurately presented the life of Jesus while He was on earth as well as accurately described the teachings of Jesus to His followers. Like all of the parts of the New Testament, the truths in the Gospel written by Luke are timeless, and they apply to all people everywhere. We are about 2000 years removed from the time of Luke's research and writing, but there will be benefits in our considering anew the story of Jesus and all the events that were fulfilled among the people of Israel. Theophilus was not alone in his need for reassurance. In each generation there are many like him, including us.

There is one more fact I want to mention about the writings of Luke. The Gospel of Luke is really only one-half of a two-part work. Luke also wrote the Book of Acts, which is the history of the early Church. The Gospel account is the record of "all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven." Acts is the record of what Jesus continued to do through the early Church after His ascension and after His followers received the Holy Spirit.

The four verses we read are the introduction to this Gospel account. I want to briefly analyze these introductory verses. Luke describes his work as “an account” (*diegesis*) or narrative. In Luke’s era, most such narratives were in oral, rather than in written forms. The ancient world did not have the printed page. Writing texts by hand was a slow laborious activity. Hand written texts were not in wide circulation. Oral reports were not always accurate because details would change with the retellings. The fact that Luke wrote an orderly account insured that readers in the first century would have unchanging information, and made it possible for readers through the centuries to have a historical record.

Luke acknowledged that other reports were in circulation. This is not surprising since there were many witnesses to the life and ministry of Christ. We do not know who these witnesses were, but some of them must have been Apostles since they had been eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry “from the beginning” and had become “servants of the word.” These witnesses had been in a position to observe the life of Jesus Christ in direct personal ways and to sit at Jesus’ feet while He taught. Luke was calling attention here to the credibility of his sources of information.

The message of the early Church dealt with the plain and simple facts of Jesus’ life: that He was the Son of God who had come to earth in fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures, that He came to lay down His life as an atonement for human sin, and that He conquered death through resurrection. The Gospel was a great deal more simple than we are inclined to make it today. The Gospel of the early Church was essentially the history of Jesus’ life on earth. Luke rooted his Gospel in historical facts that could be verifiable.

Notice that the accounts of eyewitnesses were of “the things that had been fulfilled.” This statement further narrowed down the scope of the Gospel message. The preaching of the leaders of the early Church was based on the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus, and the events associated with His life, were shown to be the fulfillment of Old Testament promises and prophecies. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus revealed the grand design of God’s eternal plan.

Luke was not himself an eyewitness to these things that were fulfilled. He gathered his information second hand, but, as he said, he carefully researched previous written and oral accounts and verified everything before he wrote (1:3). I want to say something here about the inspiration of Scripture. Evangelicals hold to the verbal inspiration of Scripture, and so they believe that Luke was inspired by the Holy Spirit as he wrote. This does not mean that the Spirit dictated Luke's message to him. Rather, the Spirit guided Luke as he carefully researched the history of Jesus' life and ministry, and guided him in his thoughts and use of words so that the content of this Gospel turned out to be exactly what God intended. Inspiration of the Holy Spirit did not preclude the use of careful scholarship on Luke's part.

There are four outstanding characteristics about Luke's approach to his task. First, he "carefully investigated" (*parekolouthekoti*) the information which came to him. Luke was well qualified to investigate the accuracy of the reports which came to him. He was well educated, a physician by training. He was a member of the Apostle Paul's traveling team on two missionary journeys, and he faithfully remained with Paul throughout the months after Paul's arrest and subsequent imprisonment. Luke would have had the opportunity to interview many of the prominent leaders of the early Church. It seems obvious that he had the opportunity to interview Mary, the human mother of Jesus, because he included details about her conversations with the angel, Elizabeth, Zachariah, and Joseph in his narrative, as well as other personal memories.

Second, Luke's study was thorough: he says he studied "everything" (*pasin*). Luke wanted to get all his facts correct, to be accurate in his portrayal of Jesus. He wanted to be thorough, but that does not mean that he included all the available information in his Gospel account. He investigated everything, but then selected only the data that he (and the Holy Spirit) considered necessary for preservation. Luke makes it clear that he did his homework.

Third, Luke went back to "the beginning" (*anochen*) of the story of Jesus. This is why the story of Jesus actually began with John the Baptist, who was the one designated in the Old Testament prophecy to introduce Jesus to the world.

Finally, Luke wrote his account in an "orderly" (*kathexes*) way. This does not mean that he presented his material in strict chronological sequence. Rather, it is an indication of the logical and organized way in which he described the life of Jesus Christ.

All the care given by Luke to the task of writing was, as noted earlier, intended to reassure his reader then, Theophilus, and us, today, of the truth concerning Jesus Christ. Our faith and confidence will be stronger if we know they are based on unshakable historical evidence. *[The word translated "know" is not the regular ginosko but the intensified form epiginosko, "to know thoroughly or to know well."]* In the coming months, I will select passages from this book which, I hope, will give us a greater level of confidence in who Jesus Christ was and is and about the things He wants to accomplish in us.

If Luke's message about Jesus is true, then it makes a great demand of us. The message requires us to recognize Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, and to be obedient to Him, and to submit our lives to Him.

Here are two points to reflect on:

First, We can have assurance about the reliability of the Scriptures. The Apostle Paul wrote that "All Scripture is God-breathed." This meant that Scripture was inspired by the Holy Spirit. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness." Luke added one more purpose: His Scriptures were to give confidence to people who had doubts and questions.

Since Scripture is true and accurate, then we must submit our lives to it. God's Word is given to us for our benefit. The Apostle Paul wrote that "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." We can have a growing faith when we listen to and read the Word of God.