

Sunday, November 20, 2022 | Go Tell It on the Mountain

Week 1 | Luke 1:1-4 | "The Gospel to the Gentiles"

Today, we'll start studying the book of Luke. Widely understood as the most orderly account of Jesus' life, the Gospel of Luke is not only the largest compared to its brothers, Matthew, Mark, and John, but it is also the largest (by word count) in all of the New Testament. In fact, if you combine his gospel and his account of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke's writings make up a **third** of the N.T. And, according to one scholar, assuming Luke wrote on a papyrus roll, his gospel account would've stretched 35 feet, and Acts would've been 32 feet tip to tail.<sup>1</sup> So, needless to say, we'll have to divide his gospel account into multiple series rather than have one big study.

Furthermore, unlike my deep dive into the gospel of John on Wednesdays, this study will be far from exhaustive. There will be some messages which'll only cover a handful of verses, while others will cover an entire chapter. My main goal in working through Luke is to give you a **framework** by which you'll be equipped to fill out this gospel on your own. However, I promise that by the end of this study, we will have read every word together.

Now, the first series in our Luke study is called "Go Tell It on the Mountain." Not unlike the angels who proclaimed Christ's birth, Luke published the Gospel in his own words so that all the world would know exactly who Jesus was. And, more than anything, he wanted his readers to be confident that the things they had been taught were, indeed, true. Thus, the primary purpose of the Gospel of Luke is to show that the life of Jesus is not some imagined fiction but an indisputable historical fact. In other words, it is the greatest story ever told because it actually happened. As such, Luke's account has some pretty significant implications. Namely, just as Luke reported the Good News to his readers, we should broadcast the Gospel far and wide. Or, as the old Christmas carol put it, we ought to "Go, tell it on the mountain / Over the hills and everywhere / Go, tell it on the mountain / That Jesus Christ is born!"

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**READ:** Luke 1:1-4 (ESV)

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

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<sup>1</sup> Garland, David E., *Luke*, The Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 2011), p. 28.

orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

In his introduction, Luke makes four points:

**i. Luke was among many who had written their own account of Jesus' life.**

The writer says, "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us...." This implies that Luke was not the first to write his own account of Jesus' life. There were others, and apparently, there were "many."

The time during which Luke wrote his account is not unlike today. After all, we do not have one version of Jesus' life but four. Didn't that ever strike you as odd? Admittedly, it's relatively common to have multiple books about the same leader today. For instance, some 15,000 books have been written about Abraham Lincoln.<sup>2</sup> But no other world/religious leader has as many as Jesus during the first century.<sup>3</sup> Alexander the Great, arguably the greatest world leader in history, has but one "complete" early biography written by the historian Quintus Curtius Rufus in the first century, nearly **four hundred** years after Alexander's death. By comparison, we have four accounts all written within a few decades of Jesus' life: two of those accounts—Matthew and John—were written by firsthand eyewitnesses, and the other two accounts—Mark and Luke—were written by those who were close friends of those firsthand eyewitnesses. And while the earliest known copy of Alexander the Great's life dates to the ninth century,<sup>4</sup> the earliest fragments of Jesus' life date to the second century.<sup>5</sup>

**EXAMPLE:** N.T. Manuscripts vs. Other Manuscripts of that era.

From our humble beginnings, Christians have been a bookish people. We thought the best and most reliable way to tell others about Jesus was to write about him and then make copies upon copies so that everyone could read about the Messiah's life on their own. So much so that

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<sup>2</sup> NPR Staff, "Forget Lincoln Logs: A tower of Book to Honor Abe," February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012, *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/2012/02/20/147062501/forget-lincoln-logs-a-tower-of-books-to-honor-abe>, [accessed November 18, 2022].

<sup>3</sup> Hurtado, Larry W., *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia contributors, 'Histories of Alexander the Great, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 24 June 2022, 09:20 UTC, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Histories\\_of\\_Alexander\\_the\\_Great](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Histories_of_Alexander_the_Great)> [accessed November 18, 2022].

<sup>5</sup> Windle, Bryan, "The Earliest New Testament Manuscripts," February 15, 2019, *Bible Archaeology Report*, <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2019/02/15/the-earliest-new-testament-manuscripts/>, [accessed November 18, 2022].

Christians drove the development of what was then called "codex/codices," which are the precursors for the modern book form.<sup>6</sup> In other words, if you like books, thank a Christian.

ii. **Luke had been entrusted with the Gospel by reliable eyewitnesses who knew Jesus personally.**

The writer says, "just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us," meaning that, by his own admission, Luke was not an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry. He had received the story from those who were—i.e., the disciples. And Luke calls these people "eyewitnesses" using the Greek word **αὐτόπτης** (*ow-top'-tace*), which is a physician's term used to refer to a detailed examination. Interestingly, this is the same Greek word from which we get our English term "autopsy." But Luke also calls them **ὑπηρέτης** (*hoo-pair-ay-tace*) "of the word," meaning that these autopsy examiners' primary function was in the ministering of God's word. In other words, they were not novices; they were **trained** professionals.

Now, the fact that Luke was not an eyewitness to Jesus' life should not discourage us. If anything, we should be encouraged because there's objectivity to Luke's writing. He's not simply going to take everything at face value. He's going to correlate and corroborate his findings. And, thankfully, Luke wasn't too far removed from that time either. Theoretically, he could go and verify certain events.

Imagine what it must've been like for Luke to not only hear the story of Jesus from people who were themselves eyewitnesses but to also have read the accounts of the same story. And, again, to harken back to my first point, not just a few versions but **many**, each likely written in their native tongue—i.e., Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek.<sup>7</sup> Undoubtedly, there may have been gaping holes in the story, and they might've seemed to contradict each other. It would've been confusing for an outsider to get up to speed. What is an honest man to do if he wants to get down to the bedrock of what actually happened? He'd have to do some digging. Like the good scientist he was (Yes, scientist. We'll get to that in a moment.), he'd have to go to the very people mentioned in the story and get their take. After all, most people who had heard Jesus were likely alive. This is why only Luke gives us such a complete and vivid retelling of Jesus' birth because he could go and talk with Mary.

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<sup>6</sup> Hurtado (2016), p. 133-138.

<sup>7</sup> Morris, Leon, *Luke*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 35.

For instance, there are great swaths of Luke's account—over 40%—which are carbon copies of Mark's account, which was itself a collection of Peter's own eyewitness testimony.<sup>8</sup> It was like Luke used the work of Mark as the basis for his account and then grafted in his own findings from his own interviews.

Furthermore, as we'll talk about this more in a moment, Luke was a close companion with Paul, who was well acquainted with all the Disciples, particularly Peter, the chief disciple (cf. 2 Pet. 3:14-16). Peter and Paul even butted heads on one occasion (cf. Gal. 2:11-14). Not to mention the fact that Jesus' ministry was very public. Luke could quite literally travel to different towns asking person after person about what they heard and saw Jesus do.

**EXAMPLE:** Repeatedly telling a favorite story, like meeting one's wife.

I find it interesting that Luke is essentially a second-generation Christian who may not have had direct contact with Jesus and, thus, would require that things be spelled out to him by others. And then, after he had things spelled out for him, Luke would eventually do the same for Christians like Theophilus and, ultimately, us.

**iii. Luke compiled his research and placed the facts of Jesus' life in their proper order.**

The writer says, "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..." As mentioned in the introduction, combined, Luke and Acts comprise the largest portion of the New Testament. Given the name of this account, we can assume that both the Gospel of Luke and Acts were written by the same person: Luke.

While never stated explicitly, we know that Luke was the author of the Gospel of Luke not only because of historical evidence dating back as far as the second century attributing the book to Luke but the personal pronoun "we" reoccurs in Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16 marking the author as being in the Apostle Paul's company. Luke's name appears in Col. 4:14, 2 Tim. 4:11, and Philem. 24.

Little is known about Luke personally other than he was a doctor and, if Paul's grouping of him in Colossians alongside other gentiles is to be indicative of his ethnicity, he was also a gentile (cf. Col. 4:14). And since he was a physician, I'll be referring to him from time to time as "Doctor Luke" or just "the Doctor."

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<sup>8</sup> Wallace, J. Warner, "Good Reasons To Believe Peter Is The Source Of Mark's Gospel," August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018, *Cold-Case Christianity With J. Warner Wallace*, <https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/good-reasons-to-believe-peter-is-the-source-of-marks-gospel/>, [accessed November 16, 2022].

But the point I'm making here is that Luke was an actual person. He had been well-educated. And, as we'll learn from reading his account, he is a gifted writer. But here, right up front, it must be noted that Luke is an investigator. He said he "**followed** [investigated] all things **closely** [accurately] for some time past." Meaning that he made sure to check and verify all of his findings. Like a proper investigator, he wanted to get to the bottom of the case and figure out if the "Jesus" at the heart of this investigation was a real person who impacted the world significantly.

As centuries of studies have proven, Luke was a historian of exceptional ability and would've been highly esteemed by his contemporaries.<sup>9</sup> Undoubtedly, there is an orderliness about his writing even though it may not fit a perfect chronology of Jesus' life (cf. Ac. 11:1-17).<sup>10</sup> After all, Luke places Jesus' genealogy three chapters in rather than at the beginning to make more of a theological point rather than a chronological one: Jesus is the Son of God (cf. 3:22-23, 38; 4:3). Thus, when we hear the word "order," we might be better to think of **the term "design"** where Luke has placed the events of Jesus' life according to his purpose to convince his reader about the validity of Jesus' life. He is not simply relaying historical facts. He is also interpreting its meaning for his audience. Thus, though he may be a trained physician, a meticulous investigator, and a first-rate historian, Luke is, first and foremost, an **evangelist**. He does not simply want to enlighten the mind. He wants to transform a life.

**iv. Luke wrote his account to give believers certainty regarding the teachings that came from Jesus.**

The writer said that he wanted his reader, Theophilus, to have "**certainty concerning the things you have been taught.**" Luke and Acts were written around 62 A.D. While Luke's Gospel has decidedly Jewish content with Rabbis, Jewish customs, all the events happening in Israel, and so on, this account is unabashedly written for a non-Jewish audience. How interesting that the most significant portion of the N.T. was not written by a Jew for other Jews but by a non-Jew for other non-Jews. Meaning even before the turn of the first century, the Gospel had reached and was rapidly spreading through the non-Jewish world, a clear fulfillment of the Great Commission. And a big reason for its spread had been due to people like Luke (a non-Jew) explaining to people like us (non-Jews) **who** Jesus was (a Jew) and **what** had happened to him

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<sup>9</sup> Morris (1988), p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> Garland (2011), p. 55.

(a Jewish sacrifice), and **why** they should care (in fulfillment of Jewish promises).<sup>11</sup> Thus, the Gospel of Luke could just as easily be called the Gospel to the Gentiles.

And it was written to us so that we can know with “certainty” that the things that Jesus taught were true. Interestingly, the Greek word translated as “certainty” is **ἀσφάλεια** (as-fah-lay-ah) and is a technical term meaning security and/or safety. And, notably, even though it comes eighth from the end in our English Bibles, the word “certainty” comes at the end of the Greek text. And this gives the word “certainty” a significant degree of emphasis and importance. It was, quite literally, the very word his entire sentence was driving towards.

All this to say that certainty, confidence, trust, definiteness, surety, and validity was Luke’s aim when he wrote the following 25,000 words. He wanted Theophilus to be planted on the firm ground of a gospel account that had been viewed and then reviewed, verified and then reverified, hashed and then rehashed, checked and then rechecked, and, lastly, examined and then re-examined. This gospel was meant to tether Theophilus like an anchor secures a boat (cf. Heb. 6:19).

### **So, what’s the takeaway?**

**We are Theophilus.**

As we often do, we should not breeze past the name "Theophilus." Because, after all, both this gospel and the Acts of the Apostles were written to him and for his edification (cf. Lu. 1:3; Ac. 1:1). Sadly, we know little to nothing of Theophilus. Historically, we know this was a relatively common Greek name.<sup>12</sup> His name can mean, literally, “lover of God”<sup>13</sup> (**θεός+φίλος**) or, more specifically, a “friend of God.” And considering Luke addresses him as “most excellent,” a term usually implying governance in some way, most people assume Theophilus was a man of wealth and high social standing. The most likely theory was that Theophilus was the patron of Luke, who financed the two books. Talk about a worthwhile investment opportunity (cf. Mat. 6:19-21). So, assuming all that’s true, I want to leave you with this thought: We are Theophilus.

Allow me to explain.

A follower of Jesus named Luke wrote one story in two volumes, effectively making up the largest portion of the New Testament. But one of the most perplexing things about his work is that he didn't give it a proper ending. And the astute reader might wonder, "Why?"

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<sup>11</sup> Wilcock, Michael, *The Message of Luke*, The Bible Speaks Today, Revised, (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 2020), p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Garland (2011), p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> Wright, N.T., *Luke For Everyone*, (Louisville, KY; Westminster Knox Press, 2004), p. 3.

Luke never wrote a proper ending because there wasn't one to write. He wanted to show in his magnum opus that the "things" that were "accomplished" in Jesus (Gospel of Luke) and the Apostles (Acts) were still being accomplished in his day and would continue to be accomplished long into the future. In this, we see an important pattern emerge: what Jesus started, he entrusted to the disciples, who then handed it down to others—i.e., Luke—who then passed it on to people like Theophilus (cf. Lu. 1:14; Ac. 1:1).

Thus, in many ways, this whole gospel movement has been like the longest-running relay race in history **<INSERT BATON PICTURE>**, where one runner passes the baton to another, who then gives it to another, and so on. And even though it's been a rather long race (over two millennia at this point), faithful runners still, to this day, entrust to others what was first entrusted to them. This means that, as far as Luke's narrative is concerned, we are Theophilus; we're just the most recent additions to the ever-growing narrative of the gospel story. It has its beginning (Jesus) and middle bits (us), but so far, it does not have its ending. The third volume has not been written yet.

### **So, what's the takeaway?**

**We are Theophilus.**

My dear brothers and sisters, those who came before us have passed us the baton so that we might pass it on to those who come after us. Do not allow trials and tribulations to cause you to fumble the Gospel. Many runners have not yet begun their race, and they depend on us not to give up.

So, Christian, run on.

## Video Description

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Pastor's manuscript can be found here:

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