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# Luke's Prologue (Luke 1:1–4)

# 1

**Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught. (1:1–4)**

The world is full of stories. Some are compelling, others are moving, many are impactful, and a few are even capable of profoundly changing how people think and live. Many such stories have come and gone throughout history, from the legends of the ancient world, the myths of past civilizations, the fanciful stories surrounding the pantheon of Greek gods, to the classics of literature from Aesop's fables to Beowulf to Shakespeare to modern writers. But there is one enduring and true story that stands above all the rest: the life of Jesus Christ. It is, as the title of a mid-twentieth-century Hollywood retelling of His life proclaimed, "The Greatest Story Ever Told."

This is the compelling and glorious story of how God purposed

in eternity past to save lost sinners from eternal hell. His gracious, loving plan was to send His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of all who put their faith in Him. Jesus, as Paul wrote to the Romans, was “delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification” (Rom. 4:25). John wrote concerning Him, “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). It was only because “God displayed [Jesus] publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith” that He could “demonstrate His righteousness” (Rom. 3:25) and both “be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (v.26). Because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), the gospel message of salvation from sin and judgment in Christ alone completely transcends the limitations of culture and time and definitively determines every person’s eternal destiny (cf. John 3:36; 8:24; 14:6; Acts 4:12).

Accordingly, the central theme of both the Old and New Testaments is the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Rev. 19:10). Just before His ascension He told the disciples, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). It is the “Scriptures” (the Old Testament), Jesus declared to the hostile Jewish leaders, “that testify about Me” (John 5:39). The New Testament Epistles unpack all the theological riches of salvation in Christ, while the book of Revelation chronicles Christ’s second coming in glory (cf. Matt. 24:30).

But of all the books of the Old and New Testaments, the Gospels most clearly focus on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The gospel of Luke is the longest, and most thorough and complete of the four (Luke covers approximately forty pages, Matthew thirty-seven, Mark twenty-three, and John twenty-nine). Including the book of Acts, Luke’s accurate, inerrant, comprehensive narrative of the life of Jesus and its impact spans more than sixty years. It begins with the birth of His forerunner, John the Baptist, and concludes with the apostle Paul’s first imprisonment and ministry of the gospel in Rome. Altogether, Luke’s writings make up more than one fourth of the New Testament. (For a further discussion of Luke’s writings, see the Introduction to Acts in *Acts 1–12*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1994], 1–6.)

But despite his major role in chronicling the history and spread of the good news of salvation, Luke remains virtually unknown. Nowhere in his inspired writings does he refer to himself by name—not even in Acts, where he was one of Paul’s traveling companions. In keeping with Luke’s humble anonymity, the rest of the New Testament mentions his name only three times (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24). He was content to remain in the background and allow the majesty of Christ, who pervades his writ-

ing, to be the focus. Luke's accurately recorded history and theology establish his readers' understanding of the Lord's life and ministry.

The four verses that constitute the prologue to Luke's gospel are one long sentence, crafted in the polished style of a Greek literary classic. (The remainder of the gospel was written in the *koinē* Greek used in common, everyday speech, as were the other New Testament books.) Such prologues, explaining the writer's sources, purpose, and approach, were common in the scholarly writings of the Greco-Roman world (including those by such noted historians as Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, and Josephus). Luke's prologue thus marks his gospel as a serious literary and historical work, commanding the respect of even the most sophisticated, well-educated Gentile readers.

Despite his anonymity four elements of the evangelist's identity appear implicitly and explicitly in the prologue. Luke is revealed as a physician and historian, and as a theologian and pastor.

#### LUKE THE PHYSICIAN AND HISTORIAN

**Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, (1:1–3a)**

The phrase **it seemed fitting for me as well** contains this gospel's only reference to its author. As noted in the introduction to this volume, the early church unanimously identified Luke as the author of the gospel that bears his name; there was never any other suggestion concerning its authorship.

All that is known about Luke's life before he became one of Paul's partners in spreading the gospel is that he was a physician. In Colossians 4:14 Paul referred to his dear friend as "Luke, the beloved physician." Since verses 10 and 11 of that chapter identify Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justus as the only ones among this list of Paul's fellow workers who were "from the circumcision" (i.e., Jewish), it is reasonable to conclude that the people Paul refers to in verses 12–17, including Luke (v. 14), were Gentiles. (For further evidence that Luke was a Gentile, see the introduction to Luke in this volume.)

Being a physician in the ancient world did not carry the dignity that such a profession does today. Howard C. Kee gives a helpful historical perspective:

An obvious question is: did most of the Roman populace share the exalted view of the medical art propounded by its chief practitioners, and particularly by Galen [a second-century A.D. Roman doctor]? Galen is caustic in his denunciation of the money-seeking, routine-bound quacks who “enter the sickroom, bleed the patient, lay on a plaster, and give an enema.” Both from the epigrams and from non-medical writers of the second century [A.D.] it is evident that the medical profession was regarded as being characteristically greedy and fond of public display. Plutarch, in *The Flatters*, mocks the smooth bedside manner of the day. Dio Chrysostom describes the efforts of physicians to drum up trade by public lecture-presentations, intended to dazzle hearers and attract patients:

This sort of recitation . . . is kind of a spectacle or parade . . . like the exhibition of the so-called physicians, who seat themselves conspicuously before us and give us a detailed account of the union of joints, the combination and juxtaposition of bones, and other topics of that sort, such as pores and respirations, and excretions. And the crowd is all agape with admiration and more enchanted than a swarm of children.

In his fine survey, *Roman Medicine*, John Scarborough notes that there were two different classes of physicians serving two different groups of patients. The aristocrats had physicians as servants or as private employees in their own establishments, or had access to them despite their high fees and lofty reputations. There were also many illiterate doctors, quacks, charlatans; exploiters of a gullible and needy public. He remarks that, “The intellectuality of Galen fails to pierce the growing gloom of an age gradually turning from rational answers posed by the Greek heritage of questioning to the mystical, all-encompassing solutions of religion.” By the second half of the second century, there were many wonder-workers and rhetoricians, of whom Lucian draws satirical sketches in *Alexander the False Prophet* and *The Passing of Peregrinus*. . . . Although we cannot generalize from Lucian’s satirical remarks about the healing profession—in both its medical and its mystical aspects—we can safely conclude that [it] was [not] beyond criticism or universally esteemed in the later second century.

In the New Testament there are only seven occurrences of the word *hiatros*, and in only one of these is there a positive estimate of the physician. In Mt. 9:12 (=Mk. 2:17; Lk. 5:31) there is a proverbial expression about the physician’s role being to care for the ailing, rather than the well. This is offered in the synoptics as justification for Jesus’ attention to the sick, the unclean and the outcasts. In Mk. 5:26 (=Lk. 8:43), . . . the physicians have taken money from the woman with the menstrual flow but have not cured her ailment. Another proverbial expression in Lk. 4:23, “Physician, heal yourself!”, is a challenge to the one who points out problems that he must cure them. In Col. 4:14, Luke is identified as

“the beloved physician,” with no indication of the nature of the medical role he may have performed. (*Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times* [London: Cambridge, 1986], 63–65)

At the very outset of his gospel Luke acknowledged that **many** others had already **undertaken to compile an account of** the life of Jesus. He did not specifically identify any of these early sources, which have all been lost. The only ones still extant that Luke may have consulted are the inspired gospels of Matthew and Mark, which probably were written before he penned his gospel (although Luke's omission of the material in an important section of Mark [6:45–8:26] suggests that he may not have seen Mark's gospel before he wrote). Whether or not Luke saw their gospels, he had personal contact with both Mark and Matthew, since Mark and Luke both traveled with Paul (cf. Philem. 24), and Luke could have visited Matthew in Jerusalem during Paul's two-year imprisonment at Caesarea (Acts 24:27). During that same period, Luke could have interviewed those in the Jerusalem church who had known the Lord, including the apostles and His mother, Mary. In addition, Luke had access to many others who had followed Jesus during His lifetime (such as the seventy [Luke 10:1–12], the women who ministered to Him [cf. Matt. 27:55; Mark 15:40–41; Luke 8:1–3; 23:49, 55], the 120 believers who gathered in Jerusalem following Christ's ascension [Acts 1:15], and the 500 who gathered in Galilee [1 Cor. 15:6]). They would have vividly remembered the things that Jesus did and said, and Luke could have interviewed them, or possibly read their writings.

Luke's goal was not to produce just another biography of Jesus, though that would have been a noble end in itself. Far more than that, he understood that the gospel is the story of what God accomplishes through Jesus Christ in the lives of sinners. The verb translated **accomplished** (*peplērophorēmenōn*) is an intensive compound word that indicates the complete fulfillment of something, in this case the redemptive plan of God. Luke's gospel, like the other three canonical gospels, emphasizes the theme of divine accomplishment. It chronicles how God accomplished salvation for His people (cf. Matt. 1:21; Luke 19:10) through the redemptive work of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospels do not relate the story of a misunderstood ethical teacher, a failed social revolutionary, a model of selfless humility, or even a heroic martyr; they reveal the Savior who is God incarnate, the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

It is important to note that Luke was not critical of those who had **undertaken** (a term often used in connection with literary endeavors) **to compile an account** (a phrase often used to refer to historical writing) of Jesus' life and ministry. He did not pen his gospel as a corrective

to those accounts, but because God prompted him to write a comprehensive narrative of the life of Christ and the spread of His salvation gospel.

Luke's reason for referring to his sources was twofold. First, it establishes his history as a legitimate, reliable account. He was a careful historian who used credible methods of research and writing, and based his content on the firsthand accounts of eyewitnesses. Second, Luke's use of those sources places his gospel squarely in the orthodox tradition. His volume was not a bizarre, different, heretical gospel. Luke's account was consistent with the teaching of the apostles (cf. Acts 2:42) and with those of eyewitnesses and especially the other Spirit-inspired gospel writers (cf. John 20:30-31; 21:24-25).

In writing his gospel Luke utilized the source material **handed down to him by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses**. These same men (one definite article in the Greek text modifies both groups) later became **servants** (cf. 1 Cor. 3:5-9; 4:1; 2 Cor. 3:6) **of the word** (a synonym for the gospel [cf. 5:1; 8:11-13, 15; Acts 6:4; 8:4, 14, 25; 10:36; 11:1, 19; 13:5, 7, 44; 14:25; 15:7; 16:6, 32; 17:11; 18:5; 19:10]). They observed Jesus' ministry firsthand and used that knowledge to faithfully preach the gospel. God preserved and transmitted the truth through them until He inspired four specific writers to record it in the New Testament. **Eyewitnesses** were the most significant sources who **handed down** (a technical term denoting the passing on of authoritative truth) the true information upon which Luke's account was based. That Luke was not an eyewitness himself makes it evident that he was not an apostle, since one qualification of apostleship was to have witnessed the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:21-22; cf. Luke 24:45-48; John 20:19-29; 1 Cor. 9:1; 1 John 1:1-3). Like Mark, he was not himself one of their number, but was a companion of some of the apostles (most notably Paul).

Since Luke had access to this wealth of firsthand, eyewitness testimony, it was **fitting** ("good," "proper") for him to write his account. The phrase **having investigated everything carefully from the beginning** ("having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first" [NKJV]) further marks Luke as an accomplished and accurate historian. His careful and thorough research gave him a precise understanding of Jesus Christ's life and ministry. As a result, he was uniquely qualified to write this gospel narrative under the Spirit's inspiration.

Luke's acknowledgement of his use of source material must not be misconstrued as a disclaimer of divine inspiration for his gospel. The process of inspiration never bypassed or overrode the personalities, life experiences, vocabularies, or writing styles of the Bible's human authors; their unique traits are indelibly stamped on all the books of Scripture. The Spirit used Luke's knowledge, gave him additional information, guided



his selection of material, and controlled every word so that he wrote exactly what God wanted written (cf. 1 Cor. 2:12-13; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21). Therefore, his original account is infallibly and inerrantly true.

#### LUKE THE THEOLOGIAN AND PASTOR

**to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught. (1:3b-4)**

A good theologian is analytical, logical, and systematic. His goal is to persuade people to understand and accept doctrinal truth by means of a thoughtful, logical, progressive, consistent, persuasive explanation. Luke revealed himself to be a master theologian by writing his account **in consecutive order**. The New American Standard's rendering implies that Luke's gospel will be strictly chronological from beginning to end. Certainly it is generally chronological, starting with the birth of Christ, His circumcision and boyhood, moving on to His baptism and public ministry, and culminating with the cross and resurrection. (See the outline of Luke in the introduction in this volume.) There are instances, however, in which Luke arranged his material thematically to illustrate or expound a particular theological point (e.g., Luke's record of John the Baptist's arrest, 3:15-20). So Luke's narrative exhibits a basic chronological flow, but not to the exclusion of thematic, doctrinal discussion, in which he uses material out of chronological sequence.

So the phrase **in consecutive order** is better understood as a reference to the logical, systematic nature of Luke's writing. The New King James Version's translation of this phrase, "an orderly account," captures the essence of Luke's purpose in writing. His goal was to persuade; to lead his readers to believe the gospel by means of his carefully researched, logical, systematic presentation of the truth concerning God's saving purpose in Christ.

The first vital theological truth Luke wanted his readers to understand is God's sovereignty in history. He viewed God's sovereign plan of redemption, which unfolded through the life and work of Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 2:22-24), as of supreme importance. It was to die as a substitute for the sins of His people that He came into the world (19:10; cf. 9:22-23; 17:25; 18:31-34; 24:25, 26, 44). Second, Luke saw the significance of the universal sweep of redemption. He understood that salvation was available to everyone, not just the Jews (cf. Acts 10:34-48; 14:24-27; 15:12-19). Luke wanted to make it clear that the wonderful reality of God's saving purpose included Gentiles (e.g., Luke 7:1-10; 14:15-23). He himself was a

Gentile and he wrote to Theophilus, also a Gentile (Acts 1:1). In fact, Luke viewed the gospel not only as being for all ethnic groups, including Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles, but also for all categories of individuals within those groups, including women (even prostitutes), outcasts (including lepers), those possessed by demons, even tax collectors (cf. 7:36–50; 10:25–37; 15:11–32; 16:19–31; 17:11–19; 19:1–10). Luke’s emphasis on the gospel’s universal appeal can be seen in his genealogy of Jesus. Unlike Matthew, who began his genealogy with Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, Luke traces Christ’s genealogy all the way back to Adam, the father of the entire human race.

Though the main doctrinal emphasis in his gospel is the person and work of Jesus Christ, Luke did not neglect other important realities. Luke not only revealed God’s sovereign control over history, but also described His tender, compassionate concern for lost sinners (cf. the parables in chapter 15). The doctrine of salvation is critical in Luke’s gospel (his is the gospel that refers most specifically to the doctrine of justification, 18:14; cf. 7:36–50; 15:11–32; 19:1–10). In fact, the cross is the focus of more than half of his gospel, from 9:53 to the end of chapter 23. Luke also focused more on the ministry of the Holy Spirit than the other gospel writers, and recorded the Lord’s teaching on His second coming. In addition, Luke the theologian addressed several areas of practical theology, such as worship, forgiveness, mercy, thanksgiving, and prayer. Profiles of discipleship are presented.

Finally, Luke’s prologue reveals his pastor’s heart. He addressed this massive work to a single individual, a man whom he called **most excellent Theophilus**. No personal details are known about him, but the title **most excellent** suggests that he was likely from the upper level of society. (Luke uses the same phrase in the book of Acts to designate the governors Felix and Festus [23:26; 24:3; 26:25].)

**Theophilus** had already **been taught** certain **things** about Jesus. But some of that teaching had been unclear or incomplete and Luke wanted him to **know the exact truth**. The word translated **exact** means “reliable,” “certain,” or “accurate.” Luke presented to Theophilus and all others who would read his account a precise, accurate, and complete understanding of the gospel and the life of Christ. Whether Theophilus was an interested unbeliever or a new believer is not known. In either case, Luke’s intensive research and detailed writing reveals the immensity of his pastor’s heart. He cared enough about Theophilus’s soul that he made this Spirit-empowered effort to bring that one man to a more precise, accurate knowledge of the truth concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. (For other New Testament examples of that kind of concern, see Acts 18:26; 19:1–5.)

In the remarkable providence of God, the Holy Spirit ensured

that the book Luke wrote initially to one man would be disseminated around the world. The beloved physician, historian, theologian, and pastor had the privilege of becoming the instrument God used for the salvation and edification of millions throughout history (cf. 24:44-53).