

## THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Text: Luke 1:1-4

Readings: 2 Peter 1:1-21

Theme: Luke wrote his gospel to give a complete and accurate account about Jesus to provide certainty of faith.

Purpose: To explain the characteristics and purpose of Luke's gospel so that you may have certainty of faith about Jesus.

Many of us go away on holidays with the rest of our family or with friends. If you asked four members of your family, or four of your friends, to describe what you did while you were on holiday at the same place, each of you would probably begin your description in a different way and would emphasize different things; you would describe what happened from your own perspective.

This is what happened when the writers of the four gospels wrote their account of Jesus; they began differently and they emphasized different aspects of his ministry.

Matthew, writing mainly to Jews, began his gospel with a genealogy to show that Jesus was a true son of Abraham, and then described Jesus' birth.

Mark said nothing about the birth of Jesus but rather went straight to the ministry of John the Baptist and of Jesus.

John also skipped Christ's birth and began with a theological introduction.

Luke's introduction is different again. In chapters 1 and 2 he gives us a detailed account of the birth of Jesus, written in a Hebraic style.

He introduces this in verses 1-4 by explaining what he has written and why. In the Greek text this is one long complex sentence. It is a formal preface to his work in the same style as historical works of that time. It is written in classical Greek; one commentator says it is "flawless and elegant Greek" and another says it is "the best Greek in the New Testament".

This is Luke's introduction to his gospel. He describes the sources of information for his gospel, some of the characteristics of what he has written, and its purpose.

### 1. ITS SOURCES

a. Luke observes that "**Many have undertaken** to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us." In the first century there was a lot of interest in Jesus and his ministry and many had written about him. This includes the gospel of Mark, which was probably the first of the four gospels.

b. Luke mentions that these things "have been **fulfilled among us**". That phrase looks back to the prophecies of the Old Testament about the coming of the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus fulfilled all those promises and prophecies.

c. In verse 2 Luke says that this information was "**handed down to us**". The Greek phrase he uses here is a technical term for passing on information as an authoritative tradition. This could be passed on in oral or written form. He wants us, as readers, to know that his information can be trusted.

i. This information was handed down "by those who from the first were *eyewitnesses*..."

An eyewitness, children, is someone who has seen something happen, or seen someone, with their own eyes.

Luke had not seen Jesus, so he was not an eyewitness, but he has spoken to many people who were, especially the disciples.

The disciple Peter was an eyewitness. In one of his sermons recorded in the book of Acts he said; “We are witnesses of everything he (Jesus) did in the country of the Jews.” (Acts 10:39; cf. 1 Cor 15:1ff; 1 John 1:1) Peter passed on his information to Mark who wrote it down in his gospel. Perhaps Luke also spoke to Peter about what he had seen.

Luke emphasized that his information was reliable. What he wrote about Jesus was not the result of speculation or the overactive imagination of men and women; no, it was the personal witness of people who had seen what happened to Jesus and heard what he said. These people were eyewitnesses and what they saw was the basis of the gospel accounts.

ii. Luke also describes these eyewitnesses as “*servants of the word*.” These are the same people; they were “eyewitnesses” and then became “servants (or ministers) of the word”. They were disciples and then became apostles, which means “sent ones”.. In obedience to the command of the Lord Jesus they went out and preached and taught all they knew about Jesus (Acts 10:42).. Luke records all of that in his second book, “The Acts of the Apostles”.

They were “servants of *the word*.” “Word” translates the Greek word “logos”. Here it refers to the good news about Jesus. The word “gospel” means “good news”. The four gospels are not biographies about Jesus but rather record the good news of the salvation he gained for his people, how he rescued them.

This is the good news we are to pass on to other people so they too may hear about Jesus. We need to encourage people to read the Bible and come to know Jesus themselves.

d. Luke has referred to the other accounts of Jesus life that had been written, and to the sources of his information. In verse 3 he wrote; “**it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account....**”

In writing this he was not saying that the other accounts were inadequate or that they had failed; he was not putting them down as wrong, although it is possible that some had started an account but had not finished it and so were incomplete.

Rather Luke is using these other accounts as a precedent for his own - they had written and he too would write; he would do what they did.

We have considered the sources of Luke’s information. Next we consider some of the characteristics of his gospel.

## **2. ITS CHARACTERISTICS**

a. He wrote a **careful** account. In verse 3 he wrote; “Since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning....”

Luke was a physician, a medical doctor, and so was used to detailed investigation. Doctors need to examine their patients carefully to try to work out what is wrong with them, what is causing their illness. Luke applied this same care to investigating the historical facts about the life of Jesus.

Luke had travelled extensively with the apostle Paul on his missionary journeys and as he did that he met many Christians. Many of them had seen and heard Jesus or had information about his life.. Luke asked these people questions. He gathered as much information as he could, checking and cross checking his facts.

The word translated “carefully” also means accurate. It has the sense of close and painstaking research. Luke’s research and writing was not hurried or superficial, but careful and exact.

What he did is consistent with what we believe about the inspiration of the Scriptures, which were “God-breathed”. (2 Tim 3:16) In 2 Peter 1:21 Peter wrote; “men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” That is true of all those who wrote the Bible. The Holy Spirit guided and directed them so they wrote down exactly what he wanted them to write, but using their own gifts,

style and personality. The biblical writers were not simply secretaries taking down dictation from the Spirit of God. In many cases, like Luke, they did their own research so as to write a careful account of what they knew. But the result is the Word of God

b. Not only was Luke's account careful, it was also **comprehensive**. He wrote that he had "investigated everything from the beginning" (v 3)..

Luke's gospel is the longest of the gospels, with over 1000 verses, and is the longest book of the New Testament. It reached the maximum length that people could write on parchment scrolls at that time, which was nine meters.

His gospel contrasts with that of Mark which is the shortest of the four. Mark's gospel is concise and to the point and moves along quickly. Luke is far more detailed and comprehensive.

This does not mean that Luke wrote down *all* there was to say about Jesus or everything that he said and did. John concluded his gospel by saying; "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." (21:25) John used a hyperbole – he exaggerated for effect – but we get his point. Luke could have said the same thing; he did not record everything that happened. But he wanted to give a full account of the life of Jesus, beginning with the circumstances of his birth, describing his teaching and healing ministry, and then his suffering, death, resurrection and ascension.

c. So his account is careful, comprehensive and it is **connected, or orderly**.

In verse 1 Luke had said that others had "undertaken to draw up an account". The word translated "draw up" means to arrange in a row; it can be translated as "compile". It refers to writing up a report or narrative to show the sequence of events.

Luke wanted to do the same thing – "to write an orderly account". (v 4) His order is mainly chronological, but not strictly so. He usually follows the timeline of what Jesus did, but sometimes he groups events or teaching of Jesus in a more topical arrangement. But it is an orderly and connected account.

He is the only gospel writer to tie in the events of Christ's life with what was going on in Roman history at the time. For instance, he does that in chapter 2 verse 1, explaining that the birth of Jesus took place in the time when Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

We have considered the sources of Luke's gospel and some of its characteristics.

### 3. ITS PURPOSE

Matthew and Mark do not state their purpose directly; John states his purpose at the end of his gospel, but Luke puts it right up front; "...it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."

a. It was common at that time to dedicate a book to some important person. Even today someone writing a book will dedicate it to another person, a friend or family member. Luke dedicated his book to Theophilus, which means "friend of God", but we don't know who he was.

Luke addresses him as "most excellent". This was the form of address Paul used when speaking to the Roman Governors Festus and Felix. (Acts 24:3; 26:25) It may indicate that Theophilus was some important Roman official, perhaps a governor in one of the Roman provinces. Some have suggested that he may have been the sponsor or publisher for Luke's gospel. Having said all this we don't know who he was or what position he held.

Nor do we know whether or not he was a Christian. He certainly knew about Jesus and was familiar with the Christian faith. He may have been inquiring or seeking after the truth, or he may have been a recent convert to Christianity.

b. Luke wrote “so that you may **know the certainty** of the things you have been taught.” Theophilus had received oral, or verbal, instruction about the Christian faith; in addition Luke wanted to give him a written account so that he might have *certainty* of faith. He wanted this for Theophilus, but also for all who would read his gospel, for us, for you and me.

Luke wrote as a Christian to bring others to a knowledge of Christ; he wrote as a man who had faith to bring others to faith. He wrote this careful, comprehensive, connected account of the life and ministry of Jesus to show that all these things were true, they actually happened, they were historical facts. He wrote this for the purpose of convincing and converting all who might read what he had written.

These first four verses were written in the manner of classical Greek. The rest of chapters one and two were written in a Hebraic style. But after that Luke wrote in a simple popular type of Greek. His aim was to communicate the truth clearly so that people will believe in Jesus Christ and so have eternal life.

In 2 Tim 3:15 Paul wrote about how the holy Scriptures are “able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”

John wrote his gospel “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31).

Luke wrote so that you may know the certainty of these truths. The word “know” does not mean just knowing facts about Jesus or simply gathering information about him. Rather, it means a personal knowledge, a direct relationship with Jesus that informs your mind, touches your heart and changes your life!

This is why the Holy Spirit has inspired men to write the Bible. They wrote carefully and accurately. They wrote so that you may come to know Jesus Christ through faith.

Are you reading the Bible for yourself? Are you paying close attention when it is read and preached? Do you believe in Jesus Christ? Do you know the certainty of the things you have heard and read?

Amen