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Luke 1:1-4

1st Message

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GOOD NEWS: ARE YOU CERTAIN?

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

I have a great respect for doctors, particularly since my father was one. Considering what doctors do and the sacrifice they make to acquire and refine their skills, I am in awe of their dedication. My respect grows even more when I see them perform miracles in life and death situations. In February this year I got a call that a friend's father had serious heart trouble (an aortic dissection¹) and had a 50/50 chance of survival. I went to the hospital and sat several hours with his two sons as they awaited the outcome. They told me that they took comfort in the fact that their father had one of the most renowned heart surgeons in the country. After a grueling wait the door swung open and Doctor G. came in with good news. He immediately took a pencil in hand and diagramed their father's damaged aorta and the repair he skillfully accomplished. He held up his hands and with a look of elation said, "I love what I do! I am sixty-five; I have performed more than 10,000 cardiac surgeries; I have more than enough money to retire, but what would I do? What can compare with saving lives?"

Yes, what can compare to saving lives? The fact that one of the gospel writers was a doctor should make us think about the significance of his new and greater task.

Introduction to Luke's Gospel

A. The Author: Luke, the beloved physician (Col 1:14)

Before reading a book, it is helpful to know something about the author's background and purpose in writing. Unfortunately, the author of Luke-Acts, like all the other gospel writers, did not put his signature in plain view. The fact that all the gospel writers wished to remain anonymous speaks volumes about the integrity of their work. Having been profoundly moved by the life and work of Christ, either as eyewitnesses or indirectly through the apostles, they were determined that Jesus should have the spotlight and that they take no glory for themselves.

But like an artist who discreetly hides his signature in the corner of his masterpiece, the author of the third gospel did leave clues as to his identity. In four sections of the book of his second volume, the Book of Acts (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:8-18; 27:1-28:16), he changes pronouns from the third person plural ("they"), to the first person plural ("we"), which points to his presence alongside the apostle Paul. This dramatically narrows the field of possibilities of authorship to one of Paul's traveling companions, and Luke is the only one of Paul's intimate circle that matches with all four sections.

Paul mentions Luke by name three times in his letters (Philemon 24; Col 4:14; 2 Tim 4:11), calling him the "beloved physician" and "fellow worker," and distinguishes him from "other fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision" (Col 4:11). This suggests that Luke was a Gentile convert and not a Jew. Many believe that he came from Antioch in Syria and may have come to faith when some of the Jewish believers, who were scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was martyred, preached

the good news not only among the Jews, but also among the Greeks (Acts 11:21).

The internal evidence from the New Testament, coupled with the fact that the sophisticated language of Luke-Acts is that of a well-educated Greek, led the early church fathers to universally recognize Luke's hand behind the gospel. The earliest witness to his authorship comes from a second century document, the so-called Anti-Marcionite Prologue (ca. 175). It reads...

Luke, an Antiochian of Syria, a physician by profession, was a disciple of the apostles. At a later date he accompanied Paul, until the latter's martyrdom. He served the Lord blamelessly. Having neither wife nor children, at the age of eighty-four he fell asleep in Boeotia, full of the Holy Spirit.²

B. The Recipient: Theophilus

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 ESV)

The significance of Luke's work is set forth in the very first sentence. Luke opens his gospel with a dedicatory preface that was typical of classical writers when they were setting forth a serious, essential, and well-researched literary work. The ancients made a serious distinction between fact and fiction. As the second century Greek writer Lucian explains in his treatise on how to write history, "the historian's sole task is to tell the tale as it happened."³ Prefaces like this were designed to arouse the interest of the reader by establishing "firsthand knowledge of the subject matter" and placing their work "within the larger context of other known literary productions, establishing a network of relationships with existing works, inviting comparisons of all kinds."⁴

Both of Luke's volumes are addressed to a certain Theophilus, who may have been Luke's financial patron. His name means "dear to God," or "lover of God"—an identity that Luke no doubt longs to see his friend and future Gentile readers embrace.

His title, "most excellent," is normally reserved for high-ranking Roman officials (Acts 24:2; 26:25) and suggests that Theophilus was a person of some rank who had been instructed in the matters of faith, but now may be plagued with doubts as to whether he truly belongs to such a maligned and persecuted community. Being plagued by doubt is a common experience to all believers, especially during the critical stage of transition from adolescence to adulthood.

When I entered my freshman year at Stanford it was the late 60's, a time of social and political unrest and sexual revolution. During orientation week the entire freshman class assembled in

Memorial Church, my first exposure to its magnificent architecture and stunning stained glass. But instead of being led in worship, we were subjected to an anti-war speech by a former student-body president. His wife, a well-known folk-singer, further exhorted the freshman girls to use their sexual power for political ends: “Don’t sleep with any boy who doesn’t burn his draft card!” In my freshman English class the professor seemed more intent on indoctrinating us with his philosophy of life than inspiring us with great literature. “Life has no meaning,” he insisted and ridiculed those of us who were naïve enough to express our faith. For two years the campus was rocked with massive protests, sit-ins, riot police and tear gas. On one occasion I heard gunshot outside my fraternity and later that year angry students burned down Encina Hall, the university administrative center. Had I been a parent, knowing what I know now, I would have never sent my son or daughter to Stanford. But by God’s grace through the fearless leadership of godly pastors, my faith took root and blossomed there.

Conservative scholars place Luke’s writing in the late 60’s, when the political climate of the Middle East was as turbulent and unstable as it is in Syria today. The Jews had staged a massive revolt against the Romans in 66 A.D., which made the threat of an all out war inevitable. After a long siege the Romans would decimate Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and with it surrounding villages and towns would be decimated and entire populations would be dispersed. The political and social chaos that would follow heightened the necessity for an accurate, complete and persuasive narrative of the life and work of Jesus, so that as Luke says, “you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (v. 4 TNIV).

Luke’s last and most emphatic word is “certainty.” In the LXX (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) it is used of the “security” and “safety” the Lord promises his people (Lev 26:5; Deut 12:10) and of the foundations of the earth that shall “never be moved” (Ps 104:5). This is Luke’s aim. He longs for Theophilus and us to know that the faith delivered to us by the apostles is rock-solid, unshakable, true to the core.

Such solidification is needed in our multicultural world. How can we be sure we are not deluded by man-made dreams? How can we be confident of Jesus’ claims to exclusivity in the midst of so many divergent worldviews? In the very first sentence Luke highlights four qualities of his gospel that will ground Theophilus’ faith in the midst of an unstable and violent world.

I. A Gospel Rooted in History

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us,... (Luke 1:1)

Luke explains that his narrative, like many others that were circulating, is concerned with “the things that have been accomplished (lit. “bring to fullness,” “fulfill”) among us.” The term “accomplished,” or perhaps more accurately, “fulfilled,” has radical implications. Luke’s narrative doesn’t record mere history, but rather dramatic events that fulfill God’s long awaited promises. God has broken into history and has accomplished for Israel and the world what he had promised to do for centuries. It is not a new religion or novel philosophy. This is good news that is rooted in history and gives continuity with Israel’s sacred story, particularly that of the books of Samuel. From beginning to end, Luke tells “the story of Jesus as the fulfillment, the completion, of the story of David and his kingdom.”⁵ Luke’s narrative shows how all of Israel’s hopes and

dreams for a restored kingdom under a new king like David find their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth.

But there is more. The perfect passive participle (“accomplished”) indicates that the fulfillment of these events has an ongoing impact that radically alters our present world. In the opening of his second volume, Luke explains how he views his two-volume work, which constitutes more than a quarter of the New Testament:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with *all that Jesus began to do and teach*, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. (Acts 1:1-2 ESV)

Given that Luke labels his first volume as “all that Jesus began to do and teach,” John Stott suggests that an appropriate title for the second volume would be “All that Jesus continued to do and teach by his Spirit through the Apostles.” Though the work of the atonement was complete at the end of Jesus’ life, it was just the beginning of a new era. After his resurrection and ascension to the Father, the gift of his Spirit was poured out on the apostles, who continued to perform his works and spread the good news of his universal reign.

Stott remarks that it is no exaggeration to say that this is what “set Christianity apart from all other religions. These regard their founder as having completed his ministry during his lifetime; Luke says Jesus only began his.”⁶ Jesus’ life and ministry brought Israel’s history to a climax and now, with the pouring out of his Spirit on all flesh, he has ushered in nothing less than a New Creation.

The good news we embrace not only roots us in Israel’s history, but also makes the life of “the age to come” (eternal life) accessible to us now through his Holy Spirit. We are, in the words of one scholar, an “eschatological outpost in time!” These are two powerful claims, one based on historical events, the other on personal experience.

II. Credible Eyewitnesses

...just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, (v.2)

Luke’s claim might seem outlandish were it not for the fact that there were many eyewitnesses whose lives were so utterly transformed by these events that they became “servants” of the word. Joel Green explains “we typically associate the word ‘eyewitness’ with a person who has personally observed an event, but this is not always the case in antiquity.” What Luke has in mind, he says, is “people empowered by the Spirit who ‘...cannot keep from speaking about what they have seen and heard’ (Acts 4:20). And for Luke, ‘seeing’ is insufficient unless one’s eyes are opened, as the Emmaus-story demonstrates (Luke 24:13-35). ‘Eyewitnesses’ and ‘servants of the word’ are parallel expressions,”⁷ and together form an apt description of the apostles, who were with Jesus from the very beginning and chosen by him to lay foundational truth for succeeding generations.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence for the gospel is the impact the life of Jesus had on his disciples, particularly the transformation that occurred after the resurrection when they received the gift of the Spirit on Pentecost. Empowered by Christ’s Spirit, they gave their lives unequivocally to the service of Christ and his word. None of them profited for their service of the gospel. On the contrary Paul writes, “We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things” (2 Cor 4:13; see also 2 Cor 11:24-27). Tradition suggests that all of them suffered martyrdom just as the Lord they served.

In summary, the good news we embrace is rooted in God's saving acts in history, and it well attested and confirmed by the transformed lives of many eyewitnesses.

III. Enhanced by Thorough and Meticulous Research

...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, (v. 3)

Now Luke introduces his own work, for which he feels compelled to add his contribution. He wants Theophilus to know that his work is the fruit of meticulous and thorough investigation, using both written sources and eyewitness accounts that go back to the very beginning, preceding Jesus' baptism to his birth.

When did Luke have time to carry out his research? When we piece together Luke's itinerary from the book of Acts, we discover that he arrived with Paul in Jerusalem after his third missionary journey (21:17) and later accompanies him on his voyage to Rome (27:1). During the intervening two years Paul was held prisoner in Caesarea. Scholars believe that it is during this period that Luke carried out his research traversing the land, studying its customs, geography and history, and most importantly interviewing the key players for his two volume work. The local color and descriptive detail that Luke gives to Capernaum, Nazareth, Jerusalem and the temple suggests that of an eyewitness. And his account of the birth of John and Jesus contain so many intimate details it could only be the product of his personal interview with Mary.

Luke's diligent research carried over into his second volume as well. For his account in the first eight chapters of Acts he must have interviewed the other apostles, John Mark and his mother, Philip and James the Lord's brother. And finally there was the apostle Paul, who was perhaps the most influential source and motivation for his work. Consider the years Luke listened to Paul's preaching, traveled alongside him, witnessed his suffering and cared for his wounds in prison. I suspect that Paul might have even been responsible for planting the seed in Luke to write the larger story of the gospel – one that would not only incorporate a more complete narrative of the life of Jesus, but also document the spread of the gospel all the way to Rome. This was Paul's passion – the risen Christ for the whole world.

IV. A Persuasive Presentation

...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, (v. 3)

Having completed his research, Luke says that he set out to write it in an *"orderly"* fashion. "Orderly" means being "in sequence one after another in time, space, or logic."⁸ Luke's gospel is broadly chronological, but far more important is how Luke shapes his narrative geographically and thematically. Once you enter the story, you can't help but feel pulled along on an incredible journey from Jerusalem to Galilee, to Samaria, and back to Jerusalem, where book one ends. Book two opens in Jerusalem, then takes us to Samaria, then Asia Minor and Greece, then back to Jerusalem and ends in Rome. This geographical dimension catapults us out of our insular country club mentality and enlarges our vision to embrace the whole world for Christ. Luke is the only gospel writer to call the Sea of Galilee a "lake," for compared to the Mediterranean it is a mere pond.

Luke's thematic sequence is even more persuasive. After the Spirit is poured out on the day of Pentecost, both Peter and Paul seem to mirror the life of Jesus in the gospel. Like Jesus, their preaching is accompanied by miraculous works of power, healings and the casting out of demons. These mighty works increase their popularity among the people, but also arouse fierce opposition by the authorities. Like Jesus, they are beaten and imprisoned for their testimony, but they refuse to back down. And just as Jesus is raised out of the tomb, so Peter and Paul are both rescued out of prison; Peter by an angel and Paul by an earthquake. As a result, they both preach with greater freedom. Luke was with Paul in Philippi during these events. I imagine the impact of seeing Paul and Silas being beaten, thrown in prison, then hearing them sing praises at midnight, followed by a massive earthquake; Paul's rescue of the jailer and his subsequent conversion would have been as awe inspiring to Luke as Jesus' resurrection appearances were to the disciples.

This is good news that stirs the imagination and moves the heart. It is good news that is here to stay as "the cross and resurrection are stamped upon the life of the church that bears witness to them."⁹ This is a paradigm that will not disappoint you or your children by offering false hopes of a good and prosperous life if we just work hard enough. Luke, just like the other gospel writers, emphatically declares that the way of the kingdom is suffering. But as we learn to embrace suffering, even death itself, we experience resurrection life in new, unexpected and glorious ways. As we examine the closing chapters in Acts, we find Paul's experiences are almost a mirror image of Jesus' at the end of Luke's gospel. As Tom Wright observes,

Paul, like Jesus, goes on a long journey, ending up being tried before both Jews and Romans [both are even slapped by the high priest!]. . . The crucifixion narrative in the gospel is echoed by the storm and the shipwreck in Acts; the resurrection, by the safe arrival of Paul and his party in Rome, leading to the open and unhindered proclamation of the kingdom of Israel's God, the God now revealed in the risen Lord Jesus¹⁰.

My first experience with Luke-Acts occurred when I was on a long journey during a three-week study break between quarters during my sophomore year in Florence, Italy. On the train ride from Florence to Amsterdam I was reading Ray Stedman's sermon series on the Book of Acts and was struck by God's words to Paul as he was facing opposition in Corinth: "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people" (Acts 18:9-10).

After I arrived in Amsterdam, I began searching for a youth hostel, when I got lost and ended up in the red light district. I felt very alone and distressed watching young girls beckoning to prospective clients from their Disneyland like storefront windows. It was then I recalled God's promise to Paul in Acts and prayed, "Lord, you must have people in this city. Where are they? Tomorrow is Sunday and I want to worship with believers." In a matter of minutes I came around the corner and heard a man preaching in Dutch. His name was Yap Oosterhuis, a schoolteacher, who every Saturday night came down to the "Old Centre" to preach the gospel to the youth. His face beamed like a light shining in the darkness. After introducing myself, he invited me into his home and the company of their house church. For the next three weeks we traveled to Denmark, Norway, Germany and Switzerland and in each city we were embraced by the hospitality of God's people.

Later, after Emily and I were married, we suffered the devastating loss of our first two children. Though the grief cut us to the core, our faith was not destroyed because we understood the gospel paradigm. And through the passage of the years, resurrection life has surprised us in new and glorious ways, which would take an entire message to describe.

Luke, the beloved physician, discovered a higher calling than healing the physical ailments of his patients. Through careful and meticulous research coupled with his own life experiences, he has composed one of the most important documents in the history of the world. Consider the countless lives throughout the centuries that have been “saved” for eternity and grounded in their faith through his inspired words. And I take great joy in the fact that I have the privilege of serving in a church where every doctor I know serves the kingdom of God with as much dedication and sacrifice as they do their profession.

1. Technically my friend’s father had an “aortic dissection” that occurs when a tear in the inner wall of the aorta causes blood to flow between the layers of the wall. The condition often leads to death.

2. William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (N.T.C.; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 8.

3. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (AB 28; New York: Doubleday & Company), 16.

4. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 34.

5. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 381.

6. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts, The Spirit, the Church & the World* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 34.

7. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 41.

8. Kathexēs (“orderly”) – BAG, 389.

9. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 375.

10. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 375.