

# Introduction

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, as we look at these opening verses from the book of Luke this morning, my hope, my prayer is that we're going to start to get something of a feel for the nature of Luke's work. We'll appreciate the value of what we have in front of us in the gospel that he wrote, and that therefore we will be excited to dive into the book over the coming weeks and months and indeed probably years. My intention is that we will probably take the book in sections, we'll interspers it with one-offs and other short series, because it is a long book and I want to give it time to do it justice, so we'll probably have a few other things interleaved as well. But my intention is that we will spend a considerable amount of time thinking about what Luke has to tell us in his gospel. If you're wondering why this book, why dive into this as we begin our time together, well I hope that these opening verses are going to provide you with the answer to that question. Before we look at the verses particularly, there's a few kind of introductory things that it's helpful to spend a few minutes dwelling on and considering. And one of the questions that every commentary that you read on a book about the Bible or every introductory course that you do at college or something always has to answer is, who wrote the book? Now you might think that this is a straightforward question, after all I imagine it says at the top of the page, the gospel according to Luke. It says it right there. But it probably won't surprise you that for many of the more sceptical scholars, that's not quite good enough. And indeed to be fair, it doesn't say that at the top of the original documents. That's not kind of part of what Luke originally wrote. He didn't sign his name at the bottom of it. However, happily in the case of this book at least, there is very little doubt at all about who wrote it. From the very earliest fragments that we have through to the first complete records and the first records of kind of the books of the Bible being put together as a canon, from the very beginning there doesn't seem to be any doubt that it is Luke who wrote this gospel. There aren't any other serious contenders.

And more specifically, that's Luke, the beloved physician, the Luke who was the companion of the Apostle Paul for part of his journeys as recorded in Acts. He crops up in a few other places in the New Testament as well, like in the list of greetings at the end of the book of Colossians.

And why do we care? I mean, what difference does it make that Luke wrote it, right? If it's all inspired by the Holy Spirit, if it is God's word to us, what difference does it make to you? The academics can think about it. Why do we care?

Well, here's the thing. Firstly, I don't think that the way that the Holy Spirit inspired the writing of the Bible makes the human author irrelevant. That's why there is a difference between what Luke writes and what Paul writes. You can detect different characters coming through in the writing of James as against the books that Moses wrote. So the human author isn't irrelevant to what God caused to be written, so it shouldn't be irrelevant to us. But also, more specifically, two concrete examples of why we care that Luke wrote this book. Firstly, if we can work out that the same person wrote multiple different books of the Bible, then that means that our understanding of one informs our understanding of the other more fully. So that's both in terms of the kind of thematic emphases, if you like, and in terms of the particular meanings of words. If I want to know how Luke is using the word salvation, it does me more good to look at how it gets used through the book of Luke and through the book of Acts than it does to go and see how James uses salvation, because different people use words in slightly different ways. So it helps us to get a better picture of what Luke actually means when he uses that word there, if we can see how he uses it in other places.

And that isn't just one of the things that I need to do as I'm preparing to speak to you. This isn't just a lot of the things that we're going to do as well. If we're going to go and look at the Greek words with our degrees in theology, this is something that you guys can do as well. Because, as I said earlier, it's also about the thematic emphases. It's not just about the nimpicky little individual words.

It's also the whole picture of what is written. And so you will find that if you go and read through Luke and read through Acts, that the experience of reading the two together will help you to more fully understand either one of the two. So I hope that that might even be something that you will consider doing over the next few weeks, perhaps. If you sit down and read for half an hour in an evening, and do that a few times, you'll get through it quickly enough. It is achievable to sit and read through half of the book of Luke in an evening. That's something you can do. And you will find that reading it in big chunks will help you to get a picture of the fullness of what's going on more than kind of diving into a few specific verses, which is mostly what we'll be doing on Sundays. And I guess it's probably how most of you read your Bibles most days, is to dig into a few verses. And that's good, but there's a time to go through the whole. So do consider doing that. Secondly, why do we care that Luke is the author?

[ 6 : 03 ] Because if we know Luke is the author, we know something of Luke's background. We know what he's like. And knowing his background, and knowing a bit of who he's writing to, can be a reassurance to us.

For me, personally, I have found it helpful to remember that the Bible has a number of models, a number of examples as we go through, of people who didn't see Jesus in person themselves, and yet who came to believe. A number of people who are dependent on the eyewitness accounts that they heard, or indeed on letters that they received, on the written testimony of what Jesus did. When Luke refers in these opening verses, in verse 2, to eyewitnesses, he does so knowing that the first people who read his book can go and talk to those eyewitnesses. They're still around, and he knows, therefore, that he can be fact-checked. We can't go and talk to the eyewitnesses, but to me it's reassuring to know that there were people who could. And so if what Luke wrote wasn't accurate, then people would have found out about that. So knowing that Luke is a concrete individual helps us to get our heads around what's going on.

It helps us to see people who didn't know Jesus directly, personally, while he was on earth, see them coming to faith. It helps us to do the same. And Luke is one of those people. And Luke is writing to another person like that, a person or people in that same situation. Luke is writing at some remove from Jesus, both geographically and in time. And he's writing to assure people that it is reasonable to believe in Jesus. That's Luke's intention.

The second thing that you always get at the start of every commentary is a bit of a summary of the major themes of the book that helps you to kind of orientate yourself for what's coming up ahead.

[ 8 : 12 ] We know that any given writer is likely to have particular emphases that they're dwelling on generally and a particular purpose for which they're writing the current book. And it's helpful to see some of that up front because it will help us hang things on a peg as we go through.

So let me highlight three summary themes, if you like, from the book of Luke. Firstly, Luke is a gospel of good news. The teaching that Luke records for us, the healing accounts that he gives us, the records of Jesus' acts of compassion, all of these are aspects of the proclamation of good news. Luke chapter 8, sorry, Luke chapter 4 and verse 18. The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free. Luke's gospel is a gospel of the proclamation of good news. And I think we can actually easily lose sight of the fact that the gospel is good news. It's not just news, it is good news. It is a good thing.

And that's not just good for some distant, far-off future, but good news now. Good news here today. Good news for the situations in which we find ourselves. Jesus sets prisoners free. Jesus makes the blind see. Luke records the good news that Jesus proclaimed in his words and his deeds.

Second theme. Luke is consistently focused on salvation. The theme of salvation is dominant. The commentator I.H. Marshall says the central theme in the writings of Luke is that Jesus offers salvation to man. Now this seems like a pretty obvious thing to say, doesn't it? I mean, what on earth is a gospel if it is not focused on salvation?

It must be a fundamental theme of a gospel account, surely. And yet, how easily we lose sight of that. How easily we lose that focus on the need for salvation.

[ 10 : 33 ] When Jesus meets Zacchaeus, the tax collector, the account recorded in Luke 19, ends with these words. Jesus said to him, today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham.

For the son of man came to seek and to save the lost. The son of man came to seek and to save the lost. How readily we lose sight of that central importance.

And furthermore, how readily we narrow that down. How quickly we end up thinking that it is good news of salvation for people like me. Good news of salvation for nice people.

Good news of salvation for people who are comfortable and middle class and happy to come and be respectable. But that isn't what Jesus means when he says he came to seek and save the lost, is it?

Of course, respectable people are lost too. But Jesus' ministry was especially for the poor, for the needy, for the social outcasts. Jesus' ministry first and foremost was to the people that nobody else wanted to talk to, because they were the sinners.

[ 11 : 46 ] For the son of man came to seek and to save the lost. Third theme, the cost of discipleship.

While the gospel is good news is a central theme, Luke, in that context, doesn't shy away from, indeed he dwells on, the nature of the response to that good news.

The expected response and the cost that it's going to bring. So he's clear that those who follow Jesus will receive the blessings of his kingdom. There is good news.

But he's also clear that we're called to live a life of self-denial, of effort and strain while we wait.

There are a lot of passages on that in Luke 9 and in chapter 14, and we'll deal with them in due course when we get there.

Jesus calls his disciples to a life of wholehearted discipleship. In contrast to and in rejection of the temptation of riches and the temptation of what this world has to offer, they are called to self-denial and discipleship.

[ 12 : 59 ] So those are some introductory themes, if you like, and that brings us to the question of why Luke wrote this gospel. And that brings us to those four verses right there at the beginning that we read earlier.

So if you've lost those, do please turn back to the beginning of Luke's gospel now. Because Luke tells us here, in so many words, that he has set out to write a careful, reliable account.

His objective is that Theophilus, and presumably others too, may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. To my mind, it's that purpose of the gospel that makes it especially suitable for us as we come to it today and in the coming years.

Because I know that many of you have known the gospel stories, have known the accounts of what Jesus did, have known the parables that he told since you were yea high. You know this stuff, don't you?

But this gospel is written for people who already know. It's written that those people might have certainty. And that is my prayer for us.

[ 14 : 05 ] This gospel is written for members of the church, or at least people on the fringes of it. Now of course, it clearly has enormous evangelistic value as well. It speaks to people outside of the church too.

But his primary purpose is to give certainty to those with it. So, be certain. As he sets out, Luke commends himself to Theophilus as a trustworthy source.

Luke is a compiler who can be relied on to give a true record of what happened. Note the various different language that he uses over these verses to build up that impression of reliability, of certainty, of dependability.

Firstly, he says he's dependent on those who were eyewitnesses and servants. Verse 2. He is dependent on what he's received from others. But he's made sure they are reliable people.

And he's carefully verified their accounts. And this isn't two different groups of people that he's talking about. The eyewitnesses and the servants. No, this is the eyewitnesses who are servants.

[ 15 : 13 ] These are one and the same. These are the men who witnessed in every sense of that word. They saw and therefore they spoke. These are men who are described as servants of the word because they aren't promoting their own opinions.

But instead have unreservedly devoted themselves to Jesus' agenda and Jesus' cause. These are servants of the word. And it's worth noting here as well that Luke distinguishes himself from these eyewitnesses.

Luke is very honest about the situation that he is coming from. He isn't pretending that he saw these things himself. He's very clear and upfront. He is not an eyewitness of the events recorded in the gospel.

He is of some of the events recorded in Acts. But he isn't pretending to be something he's not. He's a reliable source. He's trustworthy. Secondly, we can trust Luke because he has carefully investigated everything from the beginning.

He's surveyed the materials closely. He's looked at what's been written down already. And he's gathered what else he can by speaking to other people. He's chased down every lead.

[16:26] Luke has put effort in to go and find out and to make sure. He has carefully investigated. And thirdly, what he's prepared is an orderly account.

Not so much that it's in the chronological sequence that we would instinctively expect. But rather in the sense that he's been deliberate.

In the sense that he's been careful. In the sense that there is intention behind the way that he has set things out. A purpose for the order in which he presents things.

Luke here is using the historical facts. Using the realities of what happened in order to make a theological point. It seems very likely that he had far more material at his disposal than he chose to include.

To use here in his gospel. I mean if John can say at the end of his gospel. That if everything Jesus did were written down. It would fill more books than the world could hold. Then Luke wouldn't be a very good investigator.

[17:27] If this is all that he could find out. Would he? But he's deliberate in what he includes. And how he recalls it. As he produces this account.

His aim is to show that the story of Jesus as a whole. Makes sense. And is worthy of belief. He has a purpose. As he writes. And that's why here.

Luke has this introductory statement. That sets out his credentials. And tells us his purpose. In contrast to John's theological introduction. And Matthew's genealogy. And Mark's just jump straight in.

With the terseness that we expect from him. Luke has this introductory. Here's why you should trust me. Here's what we're going to do together. So we can be certain of what we find.

Because Luke is a trustworthy compiler. Secondly we should be certain. Because Luke is confirming actual. True and historical facts. Luke confirms facts.

[18:27] So some sceptics will argue. That Luke's theological intentions. Luke's purpose in writing. With theology in mind. Means that his recording of history. Can't be trusted.

But one does not follow from the other. Does it? It is perfectly possible. To have a purpose in mind. As we record history. And yet record that history accurately.

Of course any recorder. Any historian. Always has a bias. Of some kind. Always has a motivation. For why they are writing it down. What they want to happen.

As a result. Just as much as when a scientific study is published. It's worth going and looking at. Who paid for the research to be done. And therefore what result they were hoping. Might come out of it.

The same is true in history. In historical writing as well. People have an agenda. That's not something to run away from. And pretend isn't true.

[19:22] But something to recognise. And address. It is certainly possible to write true history. At the same time as writing helpful. And God-enriching theology.

And that I suggest is what Luke does. It's definitely clear that that's his intention. It's clear from this prologue. It's clear from the gospel as a whole. That he thinks he's creating a valid historical record.

That's why we have a reference here to eyewitnesses. That's why in verse 5 we have a reference to named rulers. This is a historical fact. That's why chapter 2 starts with the record of the census.

This isn't a fairy tale set a long time ago in a land far, far away. Luke provides concrete markers for historical reality.

That's not to say that theological truths can only be conveyed by history. Of course the parables show us otherwise. You can convey theology through a made-up story.

[20:23] But that is not what Luke is doing. Again, so what? Why do we care? Well because our faith is reasonable.

Because our faith is based on fact. Our faith isn't based on the sort of blind faith that many seem to suppose that it is founded on.

Some people like to set up having faith. Faith without evidence. Or even faith contrary to the evidence. As somehow superior or a thing to be applauded.

That is not the Bible's attitude at all. The Bible's attitude is our faith is grounded in reality. Our faith is grounded in what actually happened. When the early church was faced with denials of the resurrection.

And with heresies many and various. Their response wasn't speculation. Their response was this is what happened. These are the facts of history.

[ 21 : 24 ] The same should be true for us. We shouldn't be tempted to wander off into what I think might be the case. Or I like to think of God as... No.

Our faith is based on historical reality. On a person who lived and died and rose again. So this is why we don't need to be concerned about scientific and historical and archaeological investigations. We don't need to get worried when somebody goes digging over in Jerusalem about what they're going to turn up. Because when these investigations are undertaken rightly, they will always confirm what the Bible says is the case.

God is the God of science. God is the God of history. God is the God of archaeology. God is the God of the whole of reality. Science never ever will come up with a knockdown argument to disprove the existence of God.

Or to disprove the gospel accounts. Because no such thing can possibly exist. There is no such argument. The world that God has created is consistent.

[ 22 : 34 ] The world that God has created shouts out, God created it. And so when Luke and the others set out to convince people, what they provide is basically a set of facts.

Now of course no amount of head knowledge will save a man's soul. And in that sense this set of facts doesn't in isolation have spiritual value.

And yet this defined series of statements seems to be exactly what generations of Christians were determined to guard and to pass on and to hand down.

These traditions about what Jesus did and said. These historical facts are what they were so concerned for us to have. And so we are certain because Luke is a trustworthy compiler and because he lays out for us facts with historical reality.

Thirdly, we can be certain in the sense that we can be assured. In the sense that we can and should be confident. Not just in a theoretical and intellectual sense, but confident throughout our beings.

[ 23 : 54 ] Generally in our society a healthy degree of scepticism is considered to be a good thing, isn't it? To be open-minded is one of the greatest virtues in our society today.

To be willing to accept and welcome new ideas. And there is value in that. But as GK Chesterton said, merely having an open mind is nothing.

The object of opening the mind as of opening the mouth is to shut it again on something solid. And that I suggest is a key purpose of God's word.

To give us something solid with which to fill our minds. Not so that we can be closed-minded, but so that we can have a bedrock for our openness.

A foundation which we can stand on and from there investigate and discuss and discover. And that is what Luke offers us. If you like, he invites us to read this account and to see here the facts on which Christianity is based.

[ 24 : 57 ] And to find a firm, a solid, a trustworthy foundation for our faith. If we are to have faith in Christ, we must necessarily have some degree of assurance, of certainty.

That particular facts are true. At a minimum, to be a Christian, we must have confidence that Christ can save. If we don't have confidence in that, then we cannot be a believer in Jesus.

And that assurance that Christ can save can only come from an understanding of his work on the cross. And an understanding of what he set out to do there.

But I think we can go even further than this. That when Luke talks about certainty of the things that you have been taught to, it means more than just Christ can save.

I think Luke's intention is that we will have assurance not only that Christ can save, but that I have been saved.

[ 26 : 01 ] That is what he wants for Theophilus as he writes these words to him. And that, I suggest, is what Luke would want for each of us today as we come to his gospel. Not just Christ can save, but I have been saved.

Now, as I say that, I'm conscious of the danger that saying that that's what we want might discourage some of you for whom that is not how you currently feel.

If you aren't able to say that now, you'll be thinking, what's wrong with me? Why do I not feel like I could say I have been saved? Well, it certainly isn't my intention to discourage you. I think part of whether or not that's something that we feel comfortable saying is temperamental. Part of it is to do with our characters and how we've been brought up and whether that just feels like an arrogant thing to say.

But I don't think it is an inherently arrogant thing to say. And it can be a profound comfort and joy. It can be a source of confidence in the face of opposition from outside or in the face of the trials of life that come up within.

[ 27 : 14 ] But it isn't essential. We're not saved because we are assured that we are saved. We are saved because of the finished work of Christ. We are saved because Christ can save.

I'm a good Presbyterian, or at least I'm learning to be. So let me give you a bit of the Westminster Larger Catechism. Question 80.

Can true believers be infallibly assured that they are in the estate of grace and that they shall persevere therein unto salvation? In other words, can we have assurance that I am saved?

The answer, in long and complicated language, yes. Grounded upon the truth of God's promises. The assurance is not based on anything in me.

It is not arrogant. Our assurance is based on God's promises. Question 81. Are all true believers at all times assured of their present being in the estate of grace and that they shall be saved?

[ 28 : 21 ] In other words, can you be a believer and not have this assurance? Is it always true that all believers always feel assured that they are saved? Answer.

As assurance is not of the essence of faith, believers may not have assurance for a long time. And indeed, having had it, may find it to be weakened and interrupted.

In other words, yes, we can and should be assured. Grounded on the truth of God's promises. But the reality is that for many of us, we will be believers for a long, long time before we feel that kind of assurance.

And even having once had it, there will be those days where we don't quite feel it anymore. Where that assurance wanes away a little bit. But that doesn't mean it isn't something that we should earnestly desire.

That we should pray for. That we should ask God, Lord, give me that kind of assurance. That let's be saved with confidence. I have been saved by Christ.

[ 29 : 27 ] That is my prayer that our travels through Luke will give us just that. That not only can we be certain on an intellectual level, because Luke is a trustworthy compiler.

And because he lays out for us a set of facts. But we can be certain, we can be assured at every level of our being. Not just the intellectual. Because of the work of the Holy Spirit who takes these facts and applies them to our hearts.

To our entire lives. So in conclusion, what are we to do with Luke's careful account? Well if you would, have a peek back at those verses that we read from Hebrews chapter 2.

Hebrews chapter 2, the first four verses. We must pay the most careful attention therefore to what we have heard. So that we do not drift away.

For since the message spoken through angels was binding. And every violation and disobedience received is just punishment. How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?

[ 30 : 31 ] We must pay careful attention to Luke's account. Because to do otherwise is to ignore, or as the ESV puts it, to neglect so great a salvation.

We can neglect it by rejecting it outright. By saying, I don't want anything to do with that. But also we can neglect it by paying it mere lip service. By having a theoretical assent.

By having an intellectual, yes I believe this is true somewhere out there. Rather than appropriating it. Taking it for ourselves.

And believing it at a deep level. That sort of lip service is what the writer to the Hebrews suggests will result in drifting away.

Like a car driving along a straight road. If you take your hands off the steering wheel, it will continue going in a straight line for a while. But sooner or later it will begin to drift slowly off to the side.

[ 31 : 33 ] And you will need to bring it back on course. It is that kind of gradual drifting away that you barely even notice it happening. That the writers of the Hebrews have in mind here.

And if Luke's intention is that you may have certainty. Then it is that certainty that overflows into action. These verses in Hebrews are one of a number of places in the New Testament that remind

us.

About the serious reality of the prospect of hell. And Theophilus needs to know the certainty of the things he has been taught. Because Christ's saving work on the cross is not a mere example.

We need to know the certainty of what we have been taught. Because Christ's work on the cross is not mere emotionalism. It is not just an example of love.

Rather it is for the salvation of souls. It is rescuing us from a very real danger. It matters that we have certainty of what we have been taught.

[ 32 : 36 ] Let's pray. Lord we thank you for your word.

We thank you for how it speaks to our situations day by day. And we pray that as we study Luke's account of Jesus' work. That you will use it to give us certainty of what we have been taught.

That we may have confidence of what we have believed. That we may be assured of the work of Christ in us. Amen. Our final song reflects on some of these themes of certainty if you like.

How firm a foundation is.