

“That You May Have Certainty,” Luke 1:1-4 (First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2018)

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³ 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, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

PRAY

A couple of weeks ago the prime minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, claimed that there is no historical record of Jesus Christ. In other words, he said that Jesus never existed. You may not think much when you hear “Prime Minister of Pakistan,” you may think he’s some kind of outlier, but Pakistan is the world’s sixth largest country by population. Therefore, the prime minister is a very influential, powerful figure in the world.

He is, like 96% of the people in Pakistan, Muslim. However, many Muslims immediately contradicted the prime minister’s statement. They noted that there is plenty of evidence in the historical record for the existence of Jesus and that the Koran itself refers to Jesus. And no one in mainstream, American historical scholarship doubts for a second that Jesus actually existed.

But in fairness to the prime minister, he’s only saying out loud what a lot of people in the United States wonder: did Jesus really exist? Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the time of year where we celebrate the first coming of Jesus and await his bodily return. Obviously it’s also the Christmas season, and because it is in the coming weeks you’ll see ABC News specials and History Channel programming and Newsweek magazine stories at the Walgreen’s checkout line and they’ll all be asking: who was Jesus? Did he really exist? Or, is he just a myth? Was he largely or completely made up?

This is not an uncommon question in our society, but even more common is someone who says, “I believe Jesus existed, but I’m not really sure what I believe *about* him.” I know the Bible says certain things about Jesus, but can the Bible be trusted? Did he really work the miracles the Bible says he did? Did he really die on a cross and was he truly resurrected three days later? Did Jesus really claim to be God? Was he God?

To try and address these questions we’ll look at the prologue to the Gospel of Luke, or the first four verses. We’ll be in Luke all month long as we move toward and celebrate Christmas, and in his first four verses Luke tells us two things to help us assess whether or not we can trust what the Bible says about Jesus, and then we’ll take the Lord’s Supper together: *first, in writing his gospel, Luke tells us he carefully investigated all the facts.* *Second, Luke tells us the purpose of his gospel.*

First, Luke’s investigation. Who was Luke? Luke was a physician. He was not a Jew but instead was a Greek and probably hailed from Asia Minor, the region we now know as the country of Turkey. Luke was a second-generation believer in Jesus. He did not personally know Jesus but met the apostle Paul on one of his missionary journeys, heard Paul preach the gospel

and believed it, then became an assistant to Paul in his work. Luke apparently traveled all over the Roman world with Paul and was faithful to him until the end of Paul's life.

In the last book Paul wrote before his execution, 2 Timothy, we read Paul instructed Timothy to: "Do your best to come to me soon. ¹⁰ For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. ¹¹ Luke alone is with me." 2 Timothy 4:9-11a. We see how close Paul and Luke became.

Probably soon after Paul's death, as Luke realized the first-generation of believers were dying off, he was compelled and, ultimately, led by the Holy Spirit to write an account of the life of Jesus (that's the book of Luke) and an account of the first thirty years of the early church (that's the book of Acts).

Luke dedicated this book to Theophilus. We read about him in verse 3. We know little about Theophilus. Probably he was man of some means (hence the title "most excellent") and while he was not a believer he was someone interested enough in Christianity to sponsor Luke in the writing of his gospel.

Now let's look back at verses 1-2: "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us ..." Luke 1:1-2.

What's Luke telling us here? He's telling us that by the time he wrote his gospel there were already other accounts of Jesus' life. And these accounts weren't based on rumors, or hearsay, or legends. They are based on *eyewitness* testimony.

But Luke wanted to write an account of his own, and about it he said, "[I]t seemed good to me also, *having followed all things closely for some time past ...*" Luke 1:3a. I like how the NIV puts it: "Therefore, since I myself have *carefully investigated everything from the beginning*, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account ..." Luke 1:3a (NIV 1984).

It wasn't enough for Luke to take these already existing accounts of the life of Jesus, these accounts which are composed of eyewitness testimony, and create a compendium for Theophilus to read. Certainly, Luke did borrow from other authors. If you read the gospel of Mark and then the gospel of Luke, it's clear that Luke incorporated much of Mark's writing in his book.

However, it's also clear that Luke *investigated the life of Jesus for himself*. He travelled to Jerusalem and conducted first person interviews of the eyewitnesses.

And because he did we can be sure two things are true about Luke's writings: *first, they are historically accurate*. First of all, note that Luke doesn't begin his gospel by writing "once upon a time" or "long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away." That's how fairy tales and legends begin. Luke wants his readers to know that Jesus is not some made-up legend, but a real person who lived in human history.

But also the writings of Luke are full of historical details that have been proven time and time again to be correct. In fact, Luke has all these details about the ancient world that we would have never known had it not been for Luke's investigation.

For example, in Luke 3:1, we read this: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea [it-ur-REE-uh] and Trachonitis [track-un-NIGHT-us], and Lysanias [lye-SIN-ee-us] tetrarch of Abilene ..."

Luke gives us the names of five Roman officials with their specific titles so we can orient ourselves to the actual time and place to which he refers. The date is A.D. 27 or 28, and the place is Israel, or as it was commonly known then, Judea.

But for years skeptical scholars pointed to Luke 3:1 as evidence that Luke didn't know what he was talking about. The Jewish historian Josephus writes about a Lysanias of Abilene (a city in what is now Syria) who would have ruled sixty years prior to the time Luke wrote of, but there was no record outside of Luke 3 of any Lysanias of Abilene during the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Clearly, they argue, Luke was confused. He can't be trusted historically.

But then archaeology stepped in and confirmed Luke. Scholars unearthed a Latin inscription in Abilene which confirmed there was a second Lysanias who ruled during the reign of, you guessed it, Tiberius Caesar.

In Acts 17:6, authored by Luke, there is a specific Greek term used to refer to the authorities of the city of Thessalonica: *politarchs*. Again for years scholars said, "Luke can't be trusted as a writer of history – he's made this term up because nowhere outside of Acts 17:6 do we read of anyone in the history of the Roman Empire referred to as a *politarch*."

But, again, archaeology came along later and proved Luke right. They've discovered more than thirty-five inscriptions bearing the term, including several in Thessalonica from about the same time period. Repeatedly over the years even skeptical scholars have had to admit Luke's accuracy as a historian.

Second, because Luke carefully investigated all the facts, his gospel, when you read it, simply rings true. In Luke 10, we read about Mary and Martha. Many of you know the story. Martha is slaving away in the kitchen, preparing food for Jesus and all his disciples, while Mary, her sister, sits at Jesus' feet and listens to him teaching. And Martha gets angry. She says, "Jesus, don't you care I'm stuck doing all the work by myself. Tell my sister to help me." "But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things,⁴² but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.'" Luke 10:41-42.

Now, how could Luke have known how that went down? Only if he spoke to Martha. No one else would remember it. Maybe Mary did, but if she did remember she wouldn't have told Luke – she wouldn't have wanted to paint her sister in an unflattering light.

Here's what I think had to have happened: thirty years after the fact Luke traveled to Israel, sat down with Martha, and she told him about the time she met Jesus and acted like a selfish, self-righteous jerk. Luke thought it was a great story, it gave insight into what Jesus was like and how he taught, so he included it in his gospel.

Then I like to imagine Luke leaving Martha and going down to Jericho and interviewing this former tax collector he'd heard about – a man named Zacchaeus. They sit down and Zacchaeus tells Luke about the time he met Jesus. Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he, so he told Luke that he had to climb a tree to see Jesus over a crowd when Jesus came to Jericho. In his gospel, Luke writes, "So he [Zacchaeus] ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way." Luke 19:4. Again, the only way Luke could have included that little detail - it was a sycamore tree - in his gospel was if Zacchaeus told him. No one else would have remembered. No one else would have cared.

You may think, "Well, it could be that Luke actually investigated the life of Jesus and reported the facts. But couldn't it also be true that he's just a really good storyteller? That's what good fiction writers do after all. They include little details to make their stories seem real. Maybe that's all that's going on when we read the gospels."

That is actually the one thing we can be sure didn't happen. People simply didn't write fiction like that until Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote*, the world's first novel, in the early 1600's. Until then all fiction read like fairy tales.

C.S. Lewis was a professor of literature at both Oxford and Cambridge in England. About Luke's details he writes, "I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is [like the Gospels]. Of this text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage [in other words, history] ... [o]r else, some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative. If [Luke] is untrue, it must be narrative of that kind. The reader who doesn't see this has simply not learned to read."

When C.S. Lewis taught (before television, certainly before the internet or smart phones) they had time. They had time to ransack the entire library. And C.S. Lewis really had read everything he could possibly get his hands on from antiquity. He was the authority on this subject, and he said, "Luke's gospel can't be fiction, because no one wrote fiction like this until one thousand five hundred years later!"

Now, what do we take away from this? *First, if you are a Christian and you have doubts about whether or not you can trust the Bible, be reassured.* You can trust the Bible. I was blessed to grow up in a family that took me virtually every Sunday to a Bible-believing church. But even twenty-five years ago in Kosciusko, Mississippi, we got ABC, the History Channel, and Newsweek magazine. So I'd hear one message in my church about how I could trust the Bible and then another through the media and I'd wonder, "Gee, can I really trust this book?" And, frankly, the people on ABC news seemed a lot smarter than the folks teaching me in my church.

That's also true if you grow up at Grace Bible. The folks at ABC and Newsweek are smart, smarter probably than the leadership of this church, but it's still the case that the Bible, wherever it tells us history, is completely trustworthy. It's never been contradicted. No matter what you see on TV leading up to Christmas, be reassured. You don't have to be scared that if you diligently study the Bible you're going to uncover some massive fraud and lose your faith. I've been studying the Bible closely for fifteen years now and I'm more convinced than ever of its utter trustworthiness.

But what if you're here and you're not a Christian, or not sure if you're a Christian? Then this second point is for you: *second, the purpose of Luke's gospel.* Remember, Luke is writing his gospel for the benefit of someone who doesn't believe - Theophilus. In verse 4, Luke tells Theophilus he wrote all this down so "that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." Luke 1:4. Luke doesn't only mean he wants Theophilus to believe certain facts *about* Jesus. No, Luke means for Theophilus to *give his life to Jesus*. Luke writes these things down so that Theophilus would be **certain enough** about Jesus to become an actual follower himself.

Luke wanted Theophilus to believe that he was a sinner, and that God was justly angry at him for that. But instead of sending Theophilus punishment, God sent his son Jesus. Born in Bethlehem, born of a virgin, Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life of love. He died at the end of it on a Roman cross, but God raised him from the dead three days later. And now if Theophilus will just acknowledge his sins and trust that Jesus died for him to take the punishment he deserves, he will be reconciled to and loved by God forever. That's what Luke wants Theophilus to have "certainty" about, ***and that's what I want you to have certainty about. I want you to be converted and become a Christian.***

Maybe you're here and you think, "Well, J.D., I'm not one of those fringe people who doesn't think Jesus ever existed. I believe he existed. But I just don't know if I believe all the doctrine about Jesus. Besides, this certainty you want us to have, that Luke wants us to have, about these doctrines *only divides us. This dogmatic certainty hurts people.* It leads to conflict and even wars. Mainly I just believe we all need to be good people. I think if you're good, then Jesus, no matter what you believe about him, will believe in you. You'll be fine and we'll be united and won't fight over religion anymore."

A few years ago I heard a sermon where this kind of message was preached, and the preacher said that in his church "we aren't taught that we're going to [hell] because we dance, or because we listen to a little Ozzy Osbourne every now and again. We're taught to perform Random Acts of Kindness, and we're taught to cherish those who share these acts with us ... A man's actions should mean more than his words [or] his beliefs ... so if a man is kind to you, [his beliefs don't] and shouldn't matter. He's kind, so you're kind to him. And he's kind to you, because you're kind to him. I try to live my life according to the principle 'Love thy neighbor', and that should be enough ... ***If we give it our best,*** then the peace that Jesus left to us should take care of everything else."

Maybe that's how you feel. Certainty is not a good thing. But, friends, if you say, "Certainty about Jesus doesn't matter - all that matters is that you're kind to others," there's a problem: ***that***

statement about belief is in itself a belief. If you say, “Doctrine doesn’t matter - just be good,” that’s a doctrine. It’s the doctrine of justification by works. **You’re saying, “Your beliefs don’t matter but your deeds do, and you better have more good ones than bad ones.”**

And in fact, when you think about it that doctrine which you think will unite people is in fact the most divisive doctrine you could come up with.

When my kids were in kindergarten in the Oxford schools I noticed that the teachers all had this color-coded chart in their classrooms, and the better you behaved that day at school the higher you moved up on the color chart. There are nine colors or so on the chart. The goal was to end the day “on pink,” at the top of the chart. So, you start off on blue, in the middle of the chart, and if you’re bad you go down the color chart, and if you’re bad all day you’ll eventually get to red, where they have to call your parents. But if you’re good during the first hour you move to green, and if you’re good the second hour you go to yellow, then purple, and if you’re good all day long you get on pink, and then *you get to go and grab something out of the treasure box.* And I don’t know how those teachers did it but to hear my kids talk about going to the treasure box was like they were talking about drinking from the Holy Grail. But here’s the thing: to go to the treasure box it doesn’t matter what you believe, it only matters how you behave. Right? The teachers don’t, they can’t inquire about beliefs. They don’t ask you about Jesus, or Mohammed, or Oprah, or anyone else. They just want you to behave.

But, if you don’t get on pink, if you only make it to purple, the next highest color, you can’t go to the treasure box. Well, you have to have a cutoff somewhere. ***But when it comes to the idea of heaven and hell, the idea of a cutoff is terrifying.*** The whole idea of judgment day is horrible if it’s really true that we’re saved by our works and God has put a cutoff some place. **Where would it be?** The guy who makes it to pink goes to heaven, but the poor slob who only got to purple goes to hell with the guy who was on red his whole life? **That’s awful.**

Plus, as any teacher can tell you, the kids that are so often on red on the behavior chart come from the toughest home environments. You think you’re being generous and loving when you say all good people go to heaven, but in fact it’s incredibly uncharitable to those people who grew up in homes where basically they never had a chance.

If you grew up in a loving, Christian home and church, then you had tremendous advantages over 99% of the people in the world because you were brought up in an environment where you were loved and taught the truth from as far back as you can remember. That’s awesome. But you know what? The gospel of Luke, this dogmatic book, says you’re still a sinner. Your sins may not have caused great harm to yourself or society, but you’re still a sinner and you the blood of Jesus Christ must cover your sins and rescue you from the wrath of God. If that doesn’t happen you’re lost.

If you grew up in poverty, without any parents in the home (let alone any that loved you), and if you never went to church or heard the Bible, then you did not have those same advantages. You may have done a whole lot of wicked things by the time you were a teenager. Like the Ninevites in the book of Jonah, you may have never known your right hand from your left.

But still *you're only a sinner*. Your sins may have caused great harm to yourself or society, but still you're only a sinner and you know what? If you believe the gospel Luke writes about then the blood of Jesus Christ will wash the stain of your sins away like they were nothing and transform you into God's beloved child.

Do you see why Luke is so adamant about Theophilus having certainty about this gospel? Yes, Christians want to be certain about doctrine, but it's because our doctrine is the only one that can humble the proud and lift up the humble. You think you're better than everyone else? Our doctrine says, "Think again - you need to be saved by the radical grace of Jesus Christ every bit as much as the people you look down on." But, do you think God could never accept you? Our doctrine says, "Oh, friend, think again. If you trust in Jesus and what he's done for you then you are fully accepted as God's beloved no matter what you've done or what's been done to you."

Friends, through the gospel of Luke, the trustworthy, historically accurate gospel of Luke, Jesus Christ calls you to follow him. Will you do that? Will you trust him? AMEN