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The promise of a Saviour

Please read Luke 1

Introduction: Why Luke wrote his Gospel (1:1-4)

If we asked the question, ‘which writer contributed the most to the New Testament?’ we would probably say, ‘Paul, because he wrote so many letters to various churches and individuals.’ But the correct answer is Luke. Luke wrote two books: the Gospel that bears his name and the Acts of the Apostles (or the Acts of the Holy Spirit). Luke also has the distinction of being the only Gentile (non-Jewish) writer to contribute to the New Testament. He came from either Antioch (in Syria) or Philippi (in north-eastern Greece). When we read Luke’s Gospel we discover that he either explains, or does not mention, particular Jewish customs which Gentiles would not have understood. In contrast to this Matthew (who wrote, in the first instance, for Jews) assumes that his readers understand the

significance of many of the Jewish customs and rituals. Luke is also the longest of the four Gospels.

Other Gospels had already been written

Luke begins, 'Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us' (1:1). By the time Luke wrote his account Mark's was already in circulation. Matthew, Mark and John had all seen Jesus and had heard him preach, but Luke was a second-generation Christian. He could not give an eyewitness account of what the Lord had said and done in Galilee or Judea. He had to rely on the testimony of others to satisfy his curiosity, for he was born too late and too far away from the actual events to have observed what had happened.

Luke was not an apostle and it was unlikely that he saw Jesus when he was on earth. He had been converted through the ministry of those who had brought him the good news which had been preached by others. (He writes about some of these in his second book, the Acts) As a result of his conversion his life had been completely changed and the tremendous difference Christ had made in his life had transformed him in every way. This is why one of the characteristics of Luke's Gospel is his emphasis upon life-changing events.

The message of salvation was spoken of everywhere; it was a verbal message. As few ordinary people could read, nothing was written of these events at the time and the early church was living with the expectation that the Lord Jesus Christ would return at any time to set up his kingdom and bring in the culmination of all things. But, as time went by, and many of those who had personally seen and heard Jesus began to die, and the return of the Lord did not come about, it became clear that

much of the story of the Lord's ministry should be written down before it was forgotten and lost for ever.

So, Luke writes that many had 'undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down ... by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word' (1:1-2). Almost certainly Mark's Gospel was one of those 'many' accounts. A great many of these things, and the order in which Mark wrote them, have been included in Luke's Gospel. But there were other accounts which have not survived the centuries since that time. (And some of those which have come down to us are rather fanciful and evidently not inspired Scripture.)

With great foresight Luke realized that this would happen. So he, under the inspiration and direction of the Holy Spirit, also wrote down what he called a 'carefully investigated' and 'orderly account' of 'everything [about Jesus] from the beginning'.

How did Luke go about his work?

Luke was concerned about 'the things ... fulfilled among us' (1:1). That was the way early Christians viewed the life and work of Jesus—as events which were fulfilled. So many of the events concerning Jesus had been prophesied beforehand. All the way through the Old Testament we read about the one who 'is to come'.

Luke was concerned to seek out eyewitnesses in the compilation of his Gospel. These are the people who can give the most reliable testimony, because they were there and saw what happened with their own eyes, and heard what was said with their own ears.

Luke evidently received his information from the people he met. We know that he was Paul's travelling companion for much of the time from the second missionary journey right until the end of the apostle's life (see 2 Timothy 4:11). On these journeys Luke would have met many of those who had been with the Lord during his earthly ministry. Colossians 4:10, 14 and Philemon 24 tell us that both Mark and Luke were with Paul. Luke may also have known Peter. So he would have met many people who could have answered his questions about the work and ministry of Jesus.

Also we know that Luke visited the Holy Land. He was present at Paul's interviews with James (Acts 21:18-25) and it is very likely that while he was there he also met Mary, the mother of Jesus. It is very interesting to notice that Luke is the only one of the four Gospel writers to record details of the birth of Jesus (and, for that matter, John the Baptist). It seems probable that Luke was not just recording hearsay testimony, but that he obtained his information from Mary herself.

Many of these eyewitnesses consulted by Luke were also 'servants of the word' (1:2). Quite a number were apostles. The Twelve were with Jesus all through his earthly ministry. They would have been glad to pass on all that they saw and heard concerning their Master.

Luke was also concerned to investigate everything carefully from the beginning (1:2). His Gospel is a well thought-out, orderly account of the ministry of Jesus. Colossians 4:14 tells us that Luke was a doctor and Luke's Gospel certainly gives many indications that its author was a medical man. He gave careful and full descriptions of diseases. He showed great interest in individual people (far more than the other Gospel writers).

He included a number of stories about women, and he had a scientist's approach to investigative journalism.

Luke's desire was to write his Gospel telling 'everything from the beginning'. Mark begins his account at the baptism of Jesus. Matthew's Gospel has only two stories relating to the birth of Jesus; he then passes on to the commencement of Jesus' public ministry. John speaks about the Word at 'the beginning' of creation and then proceeds straight away to the ministry of John the Baptist. Only Luke tells us details about the birth of Jesus and two stories about his early childhood.

Luke wanted to write 'an orderly account' (1:3). This does not necessarily mean that it is written in chronological order. But it means that it carries with it a sense of purpose. It is not just a loose collection of sayings of Jesus and stories about him.

Why did Luke write his Gospel?

He wrote it for Theophilus. We do not know who this man was but he certainly was a specific individual. His name (or nickname) means 'lover of God' or 'one loved by God'. He was obviously someone who was interested to know more about the Christian faith and he was evidently someone who was important. Luke calls him 'most excellent Theophilus'. He uses this same title for the governor Felix (Acts 23:26; 24:3) and his successor, Festus (Acts 26:25). If Theophilus was not a high Roman official, he was certainly someone who was respected enough to have been given a courtesy title.

Luke also dedicated part two of his writings to the same person. He says, 'In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up into heaven' (Acts 1:1-2), and in the Acts of the Apostles Luke

goes on to tell Theophilus about all that Jesus continued to do through his apostles (that is, his special messengers).

The central message of Luke's Gospel is that 'The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost' (19:10). John tells us that the good shepherd 'calls his own sheep by name and leads them out' (John 10:3). Jesus called Zacchæus to come down from the tree; and today the Lord calls those whom by his grace he has chosen to eternal life from before the foundation of the world.

The birth of John foretold (1:5–25)

Something new was happening. The Old Testament period had come to an end and a new age was beginning, and John the Baptist was the link between the two. He was to herald the Messiah. His role 'was not merely to announce but to "make ready", to reveal the hearts of people and measure them against the concerns of God'.¹

Luke sets the scene

He introduces three people to us. He says these events took place in 'the time of Herod king of Judea' (1:5) The date was about 7–6 BC Herod was a cruel and vindictive man. He even had many of his own relatives killed to protect himself and his power. The Scriptures tell us what kind of man he was. It was he who ordered the killing of the innocent babies of Bethlehem after he had discovered that a new 'King of the Jews' had been born there. He ordered the murder of 'all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under' (Matthew 2:16).

But the first person we actually meet in this Gospel is a priest. His name was Zechariah, which means 'The Lord remembers'. Luke tells us that he was of the priestly division of Abijah.

From the time of David, the priests were divided into twenty-four divisions, and Abijah was one of the 'heads of the priestly families' (Nehemiah 12:12; 1 Chronicles 24:10).

Next we meet his wife. 'Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.' Priests could marry anyone, provided they were Israelite virgins. But if a priest married a priest's daughter that was considered to be a double and special blessing. It was often said of an excellent woman, 'She deserves to be married to a priest.'² The name 'Elizabeth' means 'My God is an oath,' or 'the absolutely reliable one.'³

Consider the contrast between Herod and this godly couple. Herod was a terrible character, frightened of losing his power. He was a disgrace to Israel. He tried to please God and man at the same time. However, Jesus said that anyone who tries to please two masters is doomed to failure (Matthew 6:24).

How different Zechariah and Elizabeth were from the king! 'Both of them were upright ... observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly' (1:6). This does not mean that they were sinless. We know that no one is without sin except Jesus, but Luke means that this elderly couple were faithful and sincere in keeping God's ordinances. Everything about these people was the very opposite of Herod.

But there was sadness in the hearts of Zechariah and Elizabeth. 'They had no children' (1:7). This caused great sorrow to them. Each Israelite woman longed that she would be the one chosen by God to give birth to the Messiah, but Elizabeth was barren. There was then for her apparently no possibility of producing any child—least of all the son for whom she longed. Also 'They were both well on in years' (1:7, 18).

The story opens in the temple

The temple was the place where God's presence was manifested in a very special way. Worship was offered up by thousands of priests. To make it possible for most to have the opportunity to offer sacrifices in the temple each division of priests served in there for a week twice every year. Their task was to offer incense and prayers on behalf of the Israelite people. Every day, at the morning and evening sacrifices, one of the priests was specially selected to go into the Holy Place and remain there, on his own. His task was to offer prayers and incense to God while he stood before the veil which separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies.

When Christ died on the cross the veil in the temple was split from top to bottom; his death has opened up the presence of God to all believers. The story of the beginning of this wonderful access to God begins with this statement that the humble, godly priest Zechariah entered the Holy Place. 'He was chosen by lot' (1:9) to offer the incense. This was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for him. And, as it turned out, it was a far, far greater privilege than he even dreamed possible. When the time came, 'All the assembled worshippers were praying outside' (1:10). This means that they were in the outer court of the temple. The people used to gather there to receive the Aaronic blessing from the priest when he came out from offering the incense. But on this occasion, when he came out from the Holy Place Zechariah did not say,

'The Lord bless you
and keep you
The Lord make his face to shine upon you
and be gracious to you:
The Lord turn his face towards you

and give you peace'

(Numbers 6:24-26).

Something happened in the Holy Place to delay Zechariah: 'An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right [south] side of the altar of incense' (1:11). This startled Zechariah and he 'was gripped with fear'. But the angel said, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah.' He called him by his name. The angel knew him and understood his anxieties and gave him this message: 'Your prayer has been heard' (1:13). What prayer was that? Zechariah and Elizabeth had probably long ago given up praying for a child, because such a thing was impossible. I believe the prayer that the angel was referring to was the one Zechariah had just offered. That would have been for the salvation of his people, that is, for their redemption by the Messiah.

The angel then gave Zechariah the miraculous news that Elizabeth would bear a son, and his name would be called John. John means 'the gift of God'. Hebrew names were very significant. The birth of John would, indeed, be a gracious gift of God. Geldenhuys puts it like this: 'The grace of God, soon to be revealed in the Redeemer whose coming is to be prepared by John, is the outcome of his remembrance of his covenant and of his absolute faithfulness.'⁴ All three names of each of these characters were linked together.

The angel also told Zechariah that John 'will be great in the sight of the Lord' (1:15). We all need to remember that everything that happens to us, and everything that we do is 'in the sight of the Lord' (1:6). We cannot hide anything from his all-seeing gaze. Then the angel gave more information about John. He said, 'He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth' (1:15).

The work of John was going to be like the work of Elijah (Malachi 4:5–6). John was going to ‘go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous’ (1:17). In other words, he was going, through his ministry, to cause families to be reconciled to each other and to the Lord. But his greatest work was ‘to make ready a people prepared for the Lord’ (1:17). He was going to do that by calling them to repent and be baptized.

The joyous outcome

Gabriel told Zechariah ‘good news’. This is the first time that Luke uses the word, which is connected with the word ‘gospel’. John was going to bring joy to many in Israel because he was going to be the forerunner of Christ. However, because of Zechariah’s unbelief he had to remain silent until John’s circumcision. This was in answer to his call for a sign (1:18). How could such a godly man as Zechariah disbelieve God? He knew his Bible. The Old Testament details a number of people who had children in their old age (e.g. the births of Isaac, Samson and Samuel) ‘He ought to have remembered that what God has done once, he can do again, and that with him nothing is impossible.’⁵ I believe it was not so much his lack of faith in God’s ability as his sheer amazement that he had been chosen which caused his unbelief.⁶

However, God tempers his justice with mercy. The dumbness is only to be temporary. But when the people saw him come out of the Holy Place they realized that ‘he had seen a vision in the temple’ (1:22)

All these events happened just as God said they would. His wife did become pregnant (1:24). For five months she remained

in seclusion. She had been a laughing-stock for many years because she could produce no child. Now she was going to shut herself away until it became obvious to anyone looking at her that she was expecting a baby. I wonder what she did in those five months of seclusion? I believe she quietly waited before the Lord. Her heart was overwhelmed with happiness. “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people” (1:25). She had waited for many years for this moment. Now she was going to enjoy the bliss of this miracle shut up on her own, with the Lord.

The birth of Jesus foretold (1:26–38)

Every Christmas time God’s people, and many who do not belong to the Lord, look at this story of the Annunciation (or announcement) of the birth of Christ. At the beginning and at the end of this story we read about an angel. ‘In the sixth month God sent the angel Gabriel’ (1:26). ‘Then the angel left her’ (1:38). Angels are heavenly messengers sent from God. Gabriel came to Mary with a divine message six months after he appeared to Zechariah with a similar one.

How sad it is that ‘clever’ men and women try to say that Gabriel came with a lie! They say that Mary was not really a virgin. They say that this is a myth made up to explain for simple people the mystery of how God came down to this earth. They say that Luke was telling the kind of story that his readers would find acceptable; Jesus was really born naturally with Joseph as his real father. All this talk of a girl who was a virgin giving birth to a baby is untrue, they argue.

But what nonsense these so-called theologians make of the wonderful event of God becoming man at Bethlehem! They start