

## **“Knowing with Certainty”**

**Luke 1:1-4**

**September 5, 2010**

---

### **INTRODUCTION:**

We’re beginning a new sermon series today, one that will be somewhat more lengthy than most series I do. The reason for its length is simply the length of the book we will be studying. Luke’s gospel is the longest of all New Testament books. It is 31 pages long in my ESV Bible, compared with 29 pages for Matthew, 23 for John and 19 for Mark. The second longest book in the New Testament is Acts, the sequel to Luke. Though Luke wrote only books of our New Testament, when measured by sheer volume rather than number of books, he is the most prolific of New Testament authors. He barely nudges out the apostle Paul for this distinction, even though Paul authored 13 New Testament books.

Beyond the fact that he was a prolific author, there are several other things we can learn about Luke from the New Testament. In Colossians 4:14, Paul calls him **“the beloved Physician.”** It is likely that he was a Gentile from Antioch, converted during the early missionary work of the church. We know that Luke never laid eyes on Jesus, either before or after his death and resurrection. He came into contact with Jesus through the proclamation of the early church, and his life was forever changed as a result. One of these changes is that he began to travel with Paul on some of his missionary trips. He was Paul’s loyal companion through some very difficult times. We read these words in 2 Timothy 4:10-11: **“For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me.”** There is a reliable church tradition that says that Luke remained with Paul until Paul was martyred.

Luke was also a good friend of the one to whom this gospel is addressed, a man named Theophilus. Luke addresses him as **“most excellent Theophilus”** because he was a man of some rank and influence. That form of address is used elsewhere of other ranking Roman officials. Felix, the governor of Judea is addressed as **“most excellent Felix”** (Acts 24:2). Theophilus, like Luke, was a Gentile who had been converted to faith in Christ. This young convert had a need that was very similar to other Gentile converts, and it was this need that prompts Luke’s writing. He writes both Luke and Acts to his friend Theophilus **that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.** He had been taught the truths of the gospel of Jesus, but he was troubled by doubts. Luke wants to help his friend overcome these doubts. He writes to give this help, not only to Theophilus, but to us as well. Notice three truths we can learn about certainty in these verses.

## I. The Need for Certainty

I find it striking to compare the value Luke assigns to certainty compared with the way it is viewed in our world. Luke thinks it a good thing for his friend to have certainty. Undoubtedly, Luke would regard doubt similarly to the way James viewed it. In talking about the way we should pray, James said, **“But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways”** (James 1:6-8). Note that the one who lacks certainty is unstable in all his ways. The authors of the Bible see uncertainty as a bad thing to be avoided.

How different is the current view of the world concerning certainty in religious matters! While insisting on certainty in areas related to our material world, the prevailing opinion is that asserting truth outside the material world with any certainty is naïve and even dangerous. So it’s okay for the engineer who designed your car to have certainty, but we are not allowed to claim with certainty that the brilliant engineer had a Creator who gave him his abilities.

It is necessary to acknowledge that there is a bad type of certainty that comes from pride and insecurity. So if you’re not sure of yourself, you just state your opinions more loudly and with greater certainty. But there is another kind of certainty that is life-giving, and this is the kind Luke is speaking of. He wanted Theophilus to have a deeper certainty of the truths he had been taught about Jesus.

Why would Theophilus need such certainty? Probably because of suffering and persecution he was experiencing. It was not unusual for Christians during this period to experience some opposition as they followed Christ. One of the themes Luke is going to develop in his book is the power of Jesus to defeat all enemies. One of the prominent enemies featured in Luke is Satan himself. He and his demons are portrayed as having the power to afflict people with illness (8:2; 13:11), to dehumanize and isolate people (8:26-39), and to possess people for evil purposes, as he did with Judas (22:3). But Jesus meets him in the wilderness and resists him successfully. During his ministry, he is constantly casting out demons from people. At the end of Jesus’ life, it seems that Satan has prevailed. He enters Judas so that he betrays Jesus, and Jesus dies on the cruel cross. But of course, the story doesn’t end there. Just when things are darkest, Jesus is raised from the dead, a victor even over death. Luke intends Theophilus to apply this truth to his own circumstances. But in order to do so, he must be certain that these things are true.

We need certainty for the same reason. We suffer difficulties and setbacks in life. If we lack certainty about the goodness, power, and wisdom of Jesus, our lives will become unstable. On Tuesday of this past week, a woman Wendy and I have had the privilege of knowing died of a stroke at the age of 91. Jean Belz was a pastor's wife who lived most of her adult life in a remote area of Iowa, where her husband planted a church and started a school. She left eight children and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Most of the family had the opportunity of last seeing her just in July, on the occasion of a large family reunion. One of her grandsons wrote of a conversation he had with her on the last night of the reunion. "I said goodnight to Grandma, beautiful woman, in her pajamas. She squinted at me as she crawled under the covers. 'Do you get moody? Do you worry?' This was unprovoked. I told her I don't really get moody, but I do worry over things I don't control. 'Well don't,' she said, and closed her eyes. 'God is on his throne.'" This frail, 91-year-old woman could close her eyes and rest at night because she knew with certainty that God was on his throne. We need the same certainty.

## II. The Path for Certainty

How does Luke propose going about the job of helping his friend acquire this certainty? He says that he wants to write an **"orderly account"** (v. 3) of all **"the things that have been accomplished among us"** (v. 1). He is referring to the things related to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Apparently Luke was a Presbyterian, because he wanted his account to be orderly.

There are several things that are important to notice about Luke's orderly account. Notice, for example, that Luke claims to be reporting on the actual events that happened. The written record is intended to serve the events, not the other way around. This needs to be pointed out because one of the modern explanations of the origin of Christianity is that the events were exaggerated, or in some cases just invented, in order to serve the greater good of promoting the teachings of Christ and keeping alive his memory. But that is contrary to Luke's claim for his own book. He labors to tell Theophilus of the care he has taken to report the events accurately. Notice three characteristics of his research that are stated in verse 3, where we read, **"having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you."** First, he followed all things. As best he could, he followed all the trails opened to him, not closing off any direction that presented itself. Second, he followed them closely or carefully. He asked questions of those he interviewed. He compared the oral accounts to the written accounts, giving more or less weight to each account depending on the normal standards used by any good historian. If several independent, credible eyewitnesses report on the same thing with a consistent story, Luke would judge these accounts to be true. The third quality of his research is that he followed things "from some time past." He simply means by that phrase that he did so from the beginning.

Luke reports that he had two sources of information—written accounts and eyewitnesses. He says that many had undertaken to write accounts. New Testament scholars are in general agreement that Mark’s gospel is one of the documents consulted by Luke. The eyewitnesses were largely the apostles, which Luke had the opportunity to consult on a trip he made to Jerusalem with the apostle Paul. Luke does not claim to be an eyewitness of these events himself. This seems to me to add to Luke’s credibility, not take away from it. If he were simply undertaking to fabricate a story to push his own agenda, why not fabricate his own involvement and claim to be an eyewitness? He didn’t make such a claim for the simple reason that it wasn’t true, and he was guided as much as he could by the claims of truth.

Luke’s statement about the process he followed in composing his work tells us something important about our understanding of the way God inspired the New Testament writings. Luke didn’t sit down and take dictation from God. He researched things, organized his material, and wrote as clearly as he could. His work, like the rest of the scriptures, was thoroughly human. I don’t believe Luke set out to write an inspired book. I don’t think he was aware that his book would be included in a group of sacred writings, put on a par with Moses and the prophets from the Old Testament. Nevertheless, his book is inspired of God, not because he chose it to be so, but because God chose it to be so.

This tells us two things about the path to certainty. First, certainty in our faith is not like many think of it today, as a leap in the dark. It was not Luke’s view that certainty required a suspension of one’s reason. On the contrary, he reasoned with Theophilus, presenting him with a case for certainty that required thinking. In part 2 of his work, the book of Acts, Luke wrote a 52 chapter book in his attempt to help his friend’s certainty grow stronger.

Second, we have the same thing available to us that Theophilus had available to him—the inspired writings about Jesus. It is as we read, study and meditate upon them that God will give us certainty as well. That brings us to our final point.

### **III. The Person of Certainty**

Our certainty grows as we get to know a person, Jesus of Nazareth. He is the focus of all Luke’s attention, both in this book as well as in the sequel, Acts. The first verse of Acts is revealing of the theme of Luke and Acts. **“In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach.”** Luke is concerned with the things Jesus began to do and teach, while Acts records what he continued to do and teach through the apostles and the church they founded. It is all centered on Jesus, because certainty comes as a byproduct of getting to know Jesus better.

Let me briefly point out two things Luke will teach us about Jesus that will give us greater certainty. The first is indicated by the word “accomplished” in verse 1. Luke refers to the many who **“have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us”** (v. 1). The idea of that word, reflected in a common translation, “have been fulfilled”, is to point out the deliberative action of God behind all these events. The verb is a passive participle that one commentator terms a “theological passive.” It highlights the sovereignty of God at work through everything that happened with Jesus. Even when Satan seemed to have prevailed at the crucifixion, he was only fulfilling what God had ordained should take place. Certainty requires that we have a big God, a God such as the Father of our Lord Jesus.

Luke will also teach us that Jesus has the ability to transform lives. It is hard to argue against lives that were in bondage for many years, but have been released by the power of Jesus. So Luke is going to tell us the stories of many of these people. He is going to tell us about a woman who had had a discharge of blood for 12 years. She did what any of us would do in such a situation—she searched out the greatest experts of her day in dealing with such problems. But the physicians whose help she sought did only one thing for her, impoverishing her through the fees they charged, in spite of not being able to heal her. But what they could not do, Jesus did, by the merest touch—not his touch of her, but hers of him. Luke is also going to tell us about the Gerasene demoniac, one of the most miserable people Jesus encounters. The demons who possess him have dehumanized this man and isolated him. He is in the process of being destroyed when Jesus delivers him by casting out the demons and restoring him emotionally and socially.

## **CONCLUSION:**

In just a minute we are going to close by singing a hymn that has become a favorite for many. It is a hymn celebrating the certainty Jesus brings into our lives, indicated by the words of the chorus: “It is well with my soul.” The story behind this hymn is not unfamiliar, but bears repeating. The author, Horatio Spafford, was a wealthy Presbyterian lawyer. In a two-year span, he encountered great suffering. First, he lost most of his fortune in the Chicago fire of 1871. Two years later, his wife and four daughters were traveling to Europe when their ship collided with another and foundered. Only his wife survived. After receiving a short cable from her informing him of this tragedy, Spafford immediately set out for Europe and, while on the high seas near the scene of the tragedy, wrote this hymn. In spite of the intense grief he was suffering, this hymn has a joyful note of certainty about it. *My sin—O the bliss of this glorious thought—my sin, not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more; praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!*