**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**THE CERTAINTY OF FAITH**

**Luke 1:1-4**

**INTRODUCTION**

Please open your Bibles to Luke 1. Last Sunday, we finished our series on gender and sexuality, and today, we begin a new series on the Gospel of Luke. We will be working our way through this incredible biography of the life of Jesus, a journey that I anticipate will last about two years.

The Gospel of Luke has 24 chapters, and we will be going through every single one of them, verse by verse. This is a huge commitment that we’re making. By the time we’re done, my 5 year old daughter will almost be 8. So, why Luke? I have chosen this book for one simple reason: I want our church to love Jesus more.

One of the core convictions of our church is that we believe that every text of Scripture, whether in the Old or New Testament, ultimately points us to Christ and the gospel. The gospel is at the center of our faith. It is the good news that Jesus Christ lived a perfect life for us, died a sacrificial death for us, and rose in triumphal resurrection for us, in order that we may be forgiven by God, reconciled to him, and be free to live for him without the guilt and slavery of sin through the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. Everything we teach, preach, sing, and do in our church is centered around the glorious truths of the gospel.

This series on the Gospel of Luke will be no different. It is meant to strengthen us in our trust in Christ and our belief in the gospel. But as we will see, Luke does this in a unique way. Unlike the Apostle Paul, he doesn’t explain the gospel to us. He doesn’t explain that Jesus atoned for our sins through his death on the cross that we might have eternal life. He doesn’t tell us that believers are indwelt by the Spirit or are adopted as the children of God. And yet, Luke still helps us cherish the gospel and love Jesus more. There are many ways that he does this, but let me give you four:

1. First, Luke helps us cherish the perfect life Jesus lived on our behalf. Jesus didn’t just die for our sins. He also lived for our righteousness. Living a perfect life on earth was an essential part of his mission to save us. He takes our sin, and we receive his righteousness. So as we journey through the Gospel of Luke and look at Jesus’ perfect life, we can marvel at the fact that he lived it *on our behalf*.
2. Second, Luke will help us cherish how Jesus was tempted in every way that we are, yet was without sin. This is one of the most comforting truths of the gospel, that God himself has experienced the temptations we face every day. The Gospel of Luke will help us see what that looked like in the life of the Son of God. We will see Jesus tempted in the wilderness by Satan, tempted by the moralism and self-righteousness of the Pharisees, tempted by the prospect of suffering on the cross. But though he was tempted in every way, we will see Jesus triumphing over every single one of these temptations, and in turn, we will find fresh comfort, insight, and power in overcoming our own temptations.
3. Third, the Gospel of Luke shows us how followers of Christ are to live. He does that through both Jesus’ teaching, and Jesus’ example. In Luke, Jesus will call us to take up our crosses, deny ourselves, and follow him. He will tell us that we will be persecuted as he was persecuted. The call to radical, sacrificial discipleship will be one of the most challenging parts of the Gospel of Luke. But I believe that, as we look at the example of Jesus, who is the ultimate model of humanity, we will become more and more like him through the sanctifying work of the Spirit.
4. Lastly, Luke helps us see how Jesus showed compassion towards sinners. We can read elsewhere about God’s love and mercy, but here we see God’s love and mercy *displayed*. Luke will show us God the Son himself showing mercy to real sinners who lived in real places at real times in history. In Christ, we will see the tender heart of God towards sinners like you and me, and we will grow in our confidence that he is for us, not against us.

I have titled this series, “The Gospel of Luke: Finding Certainty in a World of Doubt”. The Gospel of Luke is only the first of a two-volume series that Luke wrote for a Christian named Theophilus. The second volume is the book of Acts. Together, they are commonly called Luke-Acts and considered two parts of one book rather than two separate books. The aim of both books, however, is to give Theophilus one, central thing: certainty. The certainty that Christ is who he claims to be. The certainty that, in Christ, God is for us and not against us. The certainty that God will preserve our faith to the end despite persecution. Certainty is the purpose of the Gospel of Luke, and that is my purpose in choosing this book.

All of us will struggle with various doubts about the truths of Christianity. We live in a time when it is no longer popular to be a Christian. We are called ignorant bigots, backwards thinkers, and regressive moralists. My goal is to help all of us grow more steadfast in our certainty about Christ and the gospel, especially those who wonder whether Jesus is worth living for in today’s secular age.

Today, we will focus on the first four verses of Chapter 1 and see Luke’s own stated reasons for writing this account. These four verses are crucial, as they set the stage for the rest of the Gospel of Luke.

**Read Luke 1:1-4**

The title of this message is **The Certainty of Faith**, and my goal today is to give you three reasons from our text that will lay the foundation for the next two years for how we can find certainty in a world of doubt from the Gospel of Luke:

1. Certainty from Luke’s Credibility
2. Certainty from Luke’s Example
3. Certainty from Luke’s Saviour

(1) **CERTAINTY FROM LUKE’S CREDIBILITY**

Luke begins his gospel in verse 1 by saying that he is not the first to “compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us”. Many people already put together oral and written histories of Jesus’ life and teaching before Luke ever put pen to paper. Luke wants his readers to know that what he’s about to write isn’t coming from thin air. He didn’t imagine it. He’s not writing fiction. His gospel is part of a written and oral tradition that has been passed down from one Christian generation to the next.

Verse 2 tells us that Luke is writing as a second generation Christian when he says “those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us”. The eyewitnesses and ministers of the word (that is, the apostles), were the first generation of Christians. They are the ones who walked with Jesus. They heard his teaching with their own ears. They saw his miracles with their own eyes. And they passed on their testimony of Jesus’ works and teaching to Luke and the second generation of Christians.

The best scholarship dates the writing of Luke sometime in the 60’s AD, which would be about thirty years after Jesus was on earth. You may be thinking that thirty years is too long to be certain that Luke accurately recorded Jesus’ original acts and words. I admit that, if Luke were starting from scratch, there would be reason to doubt his gospel’s accuracy. But he wasn’t starting from scratch. That’s what Luke is telling us in verse 1. He was relying on the narratives compiled by the many who went before him.

Scholars have shown that Luke relied heavily on the Gospel of Mark, which is the eyewitness testimony of the Apostle Peter. 406 verses in Luke, or 35% of the entire gospel, overlaps with Mark. In addition, about 21% of Luke overlaps with Matthew. The general conclusion among scholars is that Luke likely used both Mark, as well as other oral and written traditions also relied on by Matthew, to gather much of the facts, stories, and dialogue used in his gospel.

But what about the content that is unique to Luke? About 40% of the Gospel of Luke is not found in any of the other gospels. So where did Luke get this material? And can we trust it? This is where verse 2 helps us. Luke says that the first generation of Christians passed on their eyewitness testimony *to us*, which includes *him*. Luke was not a passive bystander as Christianity began to grow in the world. He was an active participant in its growth. The apostle Paul himself mentions Luke three times in his letters as his companion and friend:

1. “Luke the beloved physician greets you…” (Col. 4:14)
2. “Luke alone is with me…” (2 Tim. 4:11)
3. “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.” (Philemon 1:23-24)

Luke was one of Paul’s closest companions, and accompanied Paul on many of his trips. In the book of Acts, which Luke also wrote to Theophilus, Luke actually writes himself into the story at times. There are many examples, but let me just show you one from Acts 16 in the familiar story of Paul sharing the gospel with Lydia and other women in Phillipi after he received a vision from the Spirit to go there:

“And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage…We remained in this city some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside…and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia…after she was baptized…she urged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.’ And she prevailed upon us.” (Acts 16:10-15)

Luke may have been a second generation Christian, but he was intimately familiar with the first generation. And it wasn’t just Paul. In Acts 21, Luke writes that he was with Paul when James, the brother of Jesus and the lead apostle in Jerusalem, greeted them along with all the other elders of the church in Jerusalem. Luke had access to the best sources, not just eyewitnesses, but the first disciples of Jesus, as he compiled his gospel.

There’s one more reason to trust Luke’s gospel as historically accurate, and that is his skill as a historian. We learn from Paul’s letters that Luke was a doctor, and therefore highly educated and intelligent. He would have been a detail person. As we go through this gospel, we will see that Luke applied the same attention to detail he would have needed as a doctor to his work as a historian.

Luke describes himself in verse 3 as “having followed all things closely for some time past”. We will see this in the careful attention he gives to places and times, for example. But one especially notable feature of Luke is the careful attention he pays to names. When he can, he tries to identify not only the person’s name, but where they’re from, even what family they come from. But why does that matter? It matters because it allows those who wanted to investigate the accuracy of Luke’s narratives to actually go out and meet these people or people who knew them, and ask them what happened themselves. It’s like he’s setting out his sources so that others can check his facts. Here are some examples:

* Zechariah, of the division of Abijah (Luke 1:5)
* Elizabeth, wife of Zechariah and of the daughters of Aaron (Luke 1:5)
* Mary of Nazareth, betrothed to Joseph of the house of David (Luke 1:26-27)
* Anna the prophetess in Jerusalem, daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher (Luke 2:36)
* Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Chuza (Herod’s household manager), Susanna who all accompanied Jesus and provided for him and the apostles (8:2-3)
* Jairus, the synagogue ruler in Galilee (8:41)
* Zacchaeus, a rich tax collector in Jericho (Luke 19:1-2)
* Simon of Cyrene, who bore Jesus’ cross (Luke 23:26)

Some will tell you that the Bible is just a collection of fairy tales. Others will say that you can’t trust that they’re historically reliable. Verses 1-2 tell us that we can believe that the gospel of Luke is credible because Luke himself is credible. He didn’t dream up these stories about Jesus or make them up as fiction. He relied on the best sources, rubbed shoulders with the apostles, and carefully investigated additional facts for himself that were verifiable by anyone who doubted his account. God didn’t choose an idiot to preserve his Son’s legacy. He chose an intelligent, careful, and godly man whose work has not only survived two thousand years of criticisms and doubts, but remains an example of the highest level of classical, historical scholarship.

(2) **CERTAINTY FROM LUKE’S EXAMPLE**

Trusting the truths contained in Luke begins with the assurance that the truths are accurate. But we need to remember that Luke wants to convince his readers not only that Jesus Christ is accurately portrayed in his gospel, but that Jesus Christ as portrayed in the gospel is worthy of belief. This is what the next two points will be about. That’s the certainty that Luke is talking about in verse 4. We will begin with the certainty from Luke’s example.

In verses 3-4, Luke writes, “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.” Luke wrote both Luke and Acts for a man named Theophilus. Little is known about him, but we can be fairly sure about three things.

First, Theophilus was a Christian. Verse 4 says that Luke wants him to have certainty about the things he has been taught. It’s evident that Theophilus had already been taught about Christ, and about the gospel. He had received spiritual instruction in the past. In addition, the Greek word for “certainty” is used elsewhere by Luke to mean “assurance”. It doesn’t mean “proof”. Assurance is for a believer who is struggling with belief. Proof is for an unbeliever who doesn’t yet have belief. Theophilus didn’t need proof as an unbeliever. He needed assurance as a believer. Theophilus was a Christian.

Second, Theophilus was a Gentile, not a Jew. He was an “outsider” who had become an “insider” through Christ. This is apparent for a few reasons. For example, Luke found it necessary to explain Jewish traditions. In Luke 22:1, he writes, “Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread drew near, which is called the Passover.” A little later in verse 7, he writes, “Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed.” These little details about common Jewish traditions would have been unnecessary had Luke been writing to a Jewish man. Another example is that Luke sometimes writes about the Jews in the third person. In Luke 7:3, he writes, “When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant.” These are just some of the reasons why we can confidently conclude that Theophilus was a Gentile.

Third, Theophilus was a man of high social standing. We see that in Luke addressing Theophilus as “most excellent” in verse 3. We see this moniker used only three other times in the New Testament, and in all three of those cases, the title “most excellent” is used to describe the Roman governors Felix and Festus (Acts 23:26; 24:2; 26:25). We can’t say for sure if this means that Theophilus himself was also a Roman governor, since we don’t know if “most excellent” was only used for Roman governors, but we can say that he was likely a man of high social standing, respect, and influence.

So why would Theophilus, this Christian, gentile, aristocrat, need certainty? Why would he be struggling with faith? At the time Luke is writing his gospel, the church was experiencing serious persecution. Multiple high-profile Christians had been murdered, including the apostle James, the brother of John; and Stephen, one of the original seven deacons. In addition, Paul, the great missionary of the faith, had been imprisoned in Rome. Paul had the opportunity to preach the gospel to high ranking Roman officials, but it seemed like none of them cared very much. Instead, the new converts to Christianity mostly seemed to be people of little influence, significance, and wealth. As Paul himself described the nature of the church in 1 Corinthians 1:26,

“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.”

In this historical context, it doesn’t take much to imagine the kinds of questions and doubts that “most excellent Theophilus” would have had. “Can Christianity really be true when it seems like God is punishing us through all this persecution? And can Christianity really be true when only simple-minded commoners are believing, and not the real movers and shakers of the world?” It would have been incredibly tempting for Theophilus to escape all the persecution by going back to his Gentile roots and finding safety in his high upbringing among his peers.

Haven’t you struggled with the same questions? When you see how hard it is to be a Christian, do you wonder whether God is really with us? Or when you see the gospel spreading rapidly in parts of the world that have little education compared to the west, and you compare that with how little it seems to be spreading in our own culture, does it make you think that perhaps Christianity is only for the simple, and not for educated, intelligent, and rational thinkers like ourselves? Perhaps the world is right about Christianity: it’s simply a myth that functions as a crutch for the weak, the uneducated, the “unenlightened”. The poor don’t know any better. But we know better. We have university degrees. And because we’re so smart, we’ve evolved beyond the need for Christianity.

Theophilus may have lived two thousand years ago, but his struggles with faith are really no different from our own. He was tempted to leave the hardships of Christianity behind for the comforts of his former life. He was tempted to exalt the prestige and influence he used to enjoy over the lowliness of the Christian life. We are tempted in exactly the same ways.

How does Luke help Theophilus with his questions and doubts, and how does he help us? Look at verse 3, where he says he has written this “orderly account *for you*”. Have you ever considered the amazing truth that Luke wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts *for one person*? By writing both of these books, Luke wrote more of the text of the New Testament than any other writer, including the Apostle Paul, and all of it was written out of a heart to serve *one man*.

Luke shows us the power of the gospel by showing us how it had powerfully changed his life. He wrote the Gospel of Luke out of a Christ-like compassion for a fellow believer struggling with doubt. All his labours to order the historical accounts together in a coherent fashion, to check his sources, to write with accuracy and eloquence – all this was done to strengthen the faith of one brother in Christ. This kind of love demonstrates the power of the gospel to change our lives. It’s a love for a man Luke may have never met but for their common faith in Christ. And it’s a love that could only come from knowing the God who is love and who displayed the fullness of his love through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is the kind of love that produces certainty of faith, not just for Theophilus, but for us as well. We can look at the examples of Christian brothers and sisters around us to see the power of the gospel at work. The gospel is not just good news of salvation. The gospel is the *power* of God for salvation. We see the power of the gospel to save us and change us every day in the way others care for us, pray for us, strengthen us, encourage us, teach us, exhort us, and correct us. It’s the example of these people laying down their lives for us that helps us live in the certainty of faith.

But there’s a challenge here for us as well. If our love for others affects their certainty of faith, we need to ask ourselves whether we are living in such a way that we are strengthening others’ faith. When others look at your life, particularly how you love others and care for them, do they say, “I believe that the gospel is true, because even when I don’t see the gospel’s power in my life, I see it in that person’s life. And that gives me faith that the gospel’s power will come to me as well.” That’s the kind of Christian we all need to be in order for our church to live in the certainty of faith.

(3) **CERTAINTY FROM LUKE’S SAVIOUR**

The last way we receive certainty is by looking at Luke’s Saviour, Jesus Christ, who is the Saviour of all who believe in him. This will be the shortest point, but it will also be the most important one.

There was a time not too long ago when Christian apologetics were seen as the “first responders” for those who struggle with doubt. By “apologetics”, I don’t mean saying sorry. “Apologetics” means “making a defence”. Christian apologetics is the defence of the faith primarily by using reason and philosophy. It’s giving *intellectual* answers to doubts. Of course, the reason why we give intellectual answers to doubts is that we assume that doubt is primarily an intellectual problem.

While some doubts may come from intellectual questions, the questions that most often lead people to doubt Christianity aren’t intellectual questions. They’re heart questions. The mind asks, “Does this make sense to me?” But the heart asks, “Do I *want* this?” The mind is interested in what can be known. The heart is interested in what can be loved. Our doubts come more from what we love, or don’t love, than what we know, or don’t know. The young man who grows up in the church but later leaves may come up with some philosophical reasons for rejecting Christ, but his real reason is that he loves living for himself more than he loves living for Jesus.

Luke recognized this, which is why he doesn’t respond to Theophilus’ doubts with the best of Greek philosophy and reasoning. He responds by telling the story of Jesus’ life. Why? Because he understands that knowing Jesus better is the only way we will love Jesus more, and loving Jesus more is the only way we will live by the certainty of faith.

There is nothing more important that we can devote our time, energy, and resources to than growing in our love for Jesus. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13 that, even if we have great spiritual gifts, or faith to move mountains, or the courage to die a martyr’s death, we are nothing if we don’t have love. Love is the sum of Christianity: love for God, and love for our neighbours. As we journey through Luke, I have confidence that we will grow in our love for Jesus, and through our love for Jesus, grow in our love for one another. It is then, and only then, that we will find the certainty that we need in a world of doubt.

When I was in my first year at McMaster back in 2004, one of the required courses of my program was called Western Civilization. Part of the course involved reading parts of the gospels. I was excited about this, until I learned that we would be reading the gospels through the lens of “the historical Jesus”. “The historical Jesus” was, and still is, an academic inquiry that says that Jesus’ miracles, and his claims to divinity, were all fabrications by later generations of Christians. According to scholars of the historical Jesus, Jesus didn’t do any miracles, didn’t rise from the dead, and never claimed to be the Son of God. Instead, he was nothing more than a good ethical teacher who happened to teach certain things that the Jews didn’t like.

My program was quite small. We all knew each other, which meant that everyone knew that I was a Christian. During one of our classes on “the historical Jesus”, one of my classmates asked me, “Josh, how can you continue believing in Christianity after learning about all this?” This classmate of mine had seen all the research done by these “historical Jesus” scholars that seemed to show that Jesus was no more than an inspiring ethical teacher, and she wondered how someone like me could still believe that Jesus was the Son of God and the Saviour of all mankind. Her question made me sweat. She was putting me on the spot in front of all my peers. I was scared that my classmates would think I was ignorant or simple-minded. But in that moment, God helped me. I had this, simple response: “I am so certain that Jesus is the Son of God who died for my sins that no intellectual argument could convince me otherwise.”

I need more of that kind of certainty. It’s a certainty that is unshaken by our culture. It’s a certainty that is unshaken by our circumstances. It’s a certainty that perseveres through criticism, ridicule, and rejection. And this kind of certainty only comes from a deep love for Jesus.

**CONCLUSION**

This is why I am so excited for this new series. It’s not just a two year commitment. It’s a two year journey with Jesus. We get to hear his words, see his miracles, and walk with him on his journey to the cross, where he would die for sinners like you and me. My prayer is that, as we walk with him, we would come to love him more and more.

There has never been, and never will be, a man like Jesus Christ. He was the friend of sinners, and yet he called all people to repentance. He was a powerful moral teacher, and yet he was not a legalist. He lived a sinless life, and yet he died a sinner’s death. Jesus is the God who dwells in eternity, the Lord of all creation, the Saviour of all humanity, and the prophesied Messiah. May the Lord reveal this Jesus to us, that we would be strengthened in the certainty of our faith.