

STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

Luke

60 BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

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Introduction: All of This Happened for You

I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

(Luke 1:3–4)

Luke is the odd man out of the New Testament. We need to grasp that if we want to understand the message of his gospel. He was so unlike the other New Testament writers that many people doubted he was qualified to write Scripture at all, and the apostle Paul had to defend him by stating explicitly that his gospel was as much Holy Scripture as the Old Testament.¹ Luke was an outsider to the Jewish faith, yet God inspired him to compile an account of the life of Jesus in order to prove to people all around the world that what Jesus said and did he said and did for everyone. The astonishing message of Luke's gospel is that what happened to Jesus happened for us all.

Luke was the only New Testament writer who was not a Jew. Paul was a Jewish rabbi. Peter and John were Jewish fishermen. Matthew, Mark, James and Jude were Jewish too. We do not know who wrote the book of Hebrews, but one thing at least we know for certain: its writer was a Jew. As an uncircumcised Greek from the pagan city of Antioch in Syria, Luke was therefore a glaring anomaly. When Paul lists his

¹ Paul quotes from Luke 10:7 in 1 Timothy 5:18 and describes it as *graphē*, the same Greek word that is used throughout the New Testament to describe the Old Testament as God-inspired *Scripture*.

teammates, he lists Luke among those who had once been worshippers of the pagan gods of Rome.²

It wasn't just Luke's ethnicity that set him apart from the other New Testament writers. Matthew, Peter, Mark and John had been eyewitnesses to the ministry of Jesus. James and Jude had grown up in the same house as him in Nazareth. Even the latecomer Paul had seen such glorious visions of the risen Jesus that he could claim in 1 Corinthians 15:8 that "*last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born*". Luke, on the other hand, had still been worshipping Luck, the patron goddess of Antioch, when Jesus gave his Sermon on the Mount and fed the five thousand on the shores of Lake Galilee.

Luke also differed from the other New Testament writers when it came to education. Peter and John were unschooled fishermen. James and Jude were the sons of a common carpenter. They were the kind of people the Greek philosopher Celsus had in mind when he dismissed the early Christians as "*foolish, dishonourable and stupid – nothing but slaves, women and little children*".³ Luke defied this stereotype. As a qualified doctor, few could rival his level of education.⁴ He was living proof that Jesus didn't merely come to save the weak and the poor. With Luke in his team, Paul had been able to convince many rich and powerful Romans that the coming of Jesus was good news for everyone.

This is important because it made Luke the ideal author of his gospel and of its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles.⁵ The fact

² When Paul lists his Jewish and Gentile co-workers separately in Colossians 4:10–11 and 4:12–14, Luke appears in the second list. The fourth-century historian Eusebius also tells us that he was a Gentile in *Church History* (3.4.7).

³ Celsus wrote this in his book *The True Word* in c. 175 AD. It is quoted by Origen in *Against Celsus* (3.49).

⁴ Paul tells us Luke was a doctor (Colossians 4:14). Eusebius confirms this in his *Church History* (3.4.7).

⁵ Since Luke does not name himself at the start of either book, Luke and Acts are technically anonymous. However, the early historical accounts are unanimous in attributing authorship of both books to him. For example, a

that he was a misfit among the New Testament writers made him perfectly fitted to defend Christianity when the apostle Paul was arrested in Jerusalem and taken in chains to Rome.

Luke dedicates both of his two books to Theophilus. Since the name is Greek for *Friend of God* or *Friend of the Gods*, some readers see it as nothing more than a poetic name for Christians, but Luke drops several hints that it means far more than this. We are meant to hear the echo of “*most excellent Theophilus*” (Luke 1:3) when the lawyer Tertullus addresses a judge as “*most excellent Felix*” (Acts 24:3) and when Paul addresses another judge as “*most excellent Festus*” (Acts 26:25), because Theophilus was the judge who had been picked to preside over Paul’s trial before Caesar’s court in Rome. Why else would the so-called Acts of the Apostles ignore the actions of nine of the twelve apostles? Why else would it ignore the actions of the other three after the halfway mark in order to concentrate instead on the actions of Paul? Why else would Acts end so abruptly, with Paul waiting for the verdict of a judge in Rome? Why else would Luke work so hard to prove that neither Jesus nor Paul has broken any Roman laws? All of this only makes sense if Luke is writing to provide background for Judge Theophilus in Rome.⁶

When we understand this, we begin to see God’s wisdom in choosing Luke to write this gospel. He made no secret of the fact he was a core member of Paul’s team but, as a Greek, his words could not be dismissed out of anti-Semitism.⁷ The fact that he was not an eyewitness to the life of Jesus made him all the more

manuscript of Luke’s gospel which dates back to 170 AD contains a prologue that tells us, “*Luke was an Antiochan of Syria, a physician by profession. He was a disciple of the apostles and later accompanied Paul until his martyrdom. He served the Lord without distraction, having neither wife nor children, and at the age of 84 he fell asleep in Boeotia, full of the Holy Spirit... The same Luke wrote Acts of the Apostles.*”

⁶ This becomes clearer and clearer in Luke’s second volume, so I explore the implications in much more detail in my book *Straight to the Heart of Acts* (2010).

⁷ Note the way that Luke uses the words “*we*” and “*us*” while describing the activities of Paul’s team in Acts 16:10–17, 20:5–21:18 and 27:1–28:16.

intriguing to Theophilus. Luke was a man just like himself, who through careful investigation of the facts had been persuaded to throw away the idols of Rome and to worship the Jewish Messiah. The fact that Luke was an educated doctor also made his testimony all the weightier. If a qualified physician believed that a virgin had conceived a child, that crowds of invalids had been healed and that a corpse had been raised from the dead, then Theophilus could not dismiss the reports of those miracles as fairy tales, believed too readily by the ignorant rabble. Luke's medical training and his two years of careful research gave him enough credibility with Theophilus to make him wonder if what he had heard was true.⁸

In Act 1 of his gospel, Luke records the early life of Jesus and assures Theophilus that this isn't someone else's story: **he came for you (1:1–8:56)**. In Act 2, he urges Theophilus to say yes to Jesus, assuring him that **he can use you (9:1–19:27)**. In Act 3, Luke explains to Theophilus that this invitation has been made possible because **he made a way for you (19:28–24:53)**.⁹ The first volume of Luke's two-part history of the Christian faith therefore introduces Theophilus to the founder of Christianity and repeatedly challenges him to respond to the fact that *all of this happened for you*.

So let's read Luke's gospel together. Knowing that his book would gain a wider audience than Theophilus, Luke filled it with many things that will fuel your own faith too. Whether you are a seasoned Christian or a hardened sceptic, Luke wrote his book to help you to discover that what Jesus said and did he said and did for you.

⁸ Luke undertook the research he describes in 1:1–4 during the time that Paul was imprisoned in Israel from 57 to 59 AD. Having met Theophilus on his arrival in Rome, he then wrote Luke and Acts from 60 to 62 AD.

⁹ Some commentators prefer to view Luke's structure in terms of geography: *Galilee* (1:1–9:50), *Judea* (9:51–13:21), *Perea* (13:22–19:27) and *Jerusalem* (19:28–24:53). However, I will show you that Luke's structure is far more about his challenge to us than it is about the geographical backdrop to that challenge.

Act One:

He Came for You

From Where I'm Standing (1:1–25)

The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news."

(Luke 1:19)

Matthew, Mark and Luke are often referred to as the "synoptic" gospels because they "share a common perspective", whereas John wrote three decades later to fill in the gaps in their story.¹ Although this is a helpful distinction, it can also blind us to the major differences between Luke and the other three gospels, because in many ways it is Luke that stands apart from Matthew, Mark and John. We see this clearly in the opening verses of his gospel.

In 1:1–4, Luke tells us that he is standing in the spectators' gallery. He is not like Matthew, Mark and John – an eyewitness to the events that he describes. He presents himself instead as a classical Greek historian, introducing his work in the same style as Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon. Using the best Greek of any New Testament writer, he explains that his account is the result of a careful investigation of all the evidence.² Jewish witnesses could give oral histories of what they saw and heard,

¹ Clement of Alexandria says that this was John's purpose in writing (Eusebius, *Church History*, 6.14.7).

² Luke writes perfect classical Greek when he wants to (1:1–4), but he is also skilful enough to write Greek with a Hebrew flavour at other times. He deliberately echoes Hebrew turns of phrase in his Greek when he writes that "he added to send" (20:11, 12) and "I have eagerly desired with eager desire" (22:15).

but only Luke could distil a thousand personal testimonies into a single Greek history book.³ His two years of painstaking research while his friend Paul was in prison in Caesarea from 57 to 59 AD had uniquely qualified him as a historical biographer of Jesus.⁴

In 1:5–10, Luke introduces us to a man who stood at the very heart of Jewish history. Zechariah was one of the priests who stood before the Lord in the sacred inner room of the Temple in Jerusalem. None of the other gospel writers mentions him, but Luke uses him as a historical benchmark to pinpoint the date for us as June or July 6 BC.⁵ Whereas Matthew, Mark and John start their gospels by proclaiming that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the Son of God and the eternal Creator, Luke starts by showing how these events fit in with where we ourselves are standing. All of this happened for us.⁶

Zechariah is standing in front of the altar of incense in the inner sanctuary of the Temple, but what fills his gaze is disaster. He and his wife Elizabeth are devout believers in the God of Israel and have been blameless in keeping his laws, yet their prayers have gone unanswered. They are old and childless in an age that saw infertility as a disgrace, an outward sign of God's displeasure. He is as confused about his own life as the

³ Luke says he aims to write (*graphō*, 1:3) an orderly account of what has been taught orally (*katēxeō*, 1:4).

⁴ Whereas Matthew, Mark and John tend to group their material by theme, Luke is a stickler for exact chronology. His *ordered* account (*kathexēs*, 1:3) is easily as reliable as any other ancient work of history.

⁵ Herod the Great ruled from 37 to 4 BC and was still alive when Jesus was born. Since John the Baptist was 6 months older than Jesus (1:26) and Jesus was aged 30 in 27 AD (3:1 and 23), John must have been conceived in 6 BC. 1 Chronicles 24:7–19 tells us that Zechariah's division of priests was only ever on duty in June or July.

⁶ It also happened for those all around us, so we cannot keep this good news to ourselves. Luke tells us in 1:2 that believers become "*servants of the word*". Sharing is not optional.

Jewish nation that he represents is confused by its defeat and occupation by the Romans.⁷

In 1:11–17, God does not leave Zechariah standing all alone in his confusion. The priest is suddenly terrified to see an angel standing next to the altar of incense. It is Gabriel, the same angel who appeared to the prophet Daniel and whose name is Hebrew for *God's Warrior*.⁸ He calms Zechariah with an assurance that he brings good news. God has heard his anguished prayers and will grant him the son he longs for. More than that, he will make his son a herald of God's salvation to the nation of Israel. The last two verses of the Old Testament promise that the Messiah's arrival will be preceded by a prophet like Elijah, who "*will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents*".⁹ The angel quotes from those verses to inform Zechariah that his son will be that prophet. In answering Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayers, the Lord will also answer the prayers of Israel. As a proof that their baby will preach salvation to the Jews, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even as a foetus in his mother's womb.¹⁰

Note what Luke does here at the start of his historical biography of Jesus, writing as a Greek outsider from the spectators' gallery. He grounds the story of Jesus in the Jewish Scriptures and in the Jewish Temple in the Jewish city of Jerusalem. He explains that the coming of Jesus is good news for

⁷ Zechariah means *The Lord Has Remembered* and Elizabeth means *God's Oath*. The Lord had made them infertile, not to curse them, but to make them a channel of his blessing and to fulfil his promises to Israel.

⁸ Daniel 8:16; 9:21. The time between the completion of the Old Testament in 432 BC and the appearance of Gabriel to Zechariah in 6 BC is known as the "400 years of silence". Suddenly the silence is over.

⁹ Malachi 4:5–6. John would not echo Elijah's miracles (John 10:41) so much as the revival that Elijah brought to Israel in 1 Kings 18. See Matthew 11:7–14; 17:10–13.

¹⁰ Luke 1:15 deliberately echoes the words of an angel to another infertile couple in Judges 13:4–5. Luke wants us to view his words as Scripture. The God of the Old Testament is now giving the world a New Testament.

the Jewish nation, but even as he does so he announces that the coming of the Jewish Messiah is also good news for everyone. The angel tells Zechariah that his son's task will be *"to make ready a people prepared for the Lord"*. John the Baptist would preach that no amount of Jewish ancestry could make anybody part of God's true people. Similarly, no amount of Gentile blood could ever shut them out.

In 1:18–25, Zechariah struggles to see things from where the angel is standing. He points out that he and Elizabeth are far too old to have children.¹¹ He demands proof from Gabriel. Instead of giving him proof, the angel makes him deaf and mute so that he will learn to listen.¹² He needs to stop talking and to start seeing things from heaven's perspective, like the angel: *"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news."* From where the angel is standing, this announcement makes perfect sense. The essence of the Gospel is that God helps those who cannot help themselves.¹³ Zechariah would only hear and speak again when he named his son John, which is Hebrew for *The Lord Is Gracious*. Elizabeth understands the Gospel faster than her husband. She declares that *"The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people."*

If you are Jewish, the start of Luke's gospel is fantastic news. It proclaims that God has fulfilled his promises to your nation through the birth of John the Baptist and of Jesus. If you

¹¹ Luke uses the same Greek words in 1:7 and 1:18 that are used in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament to say that Abraham and Sarah were *well on in years* (Genesis 18:11; 24:1). He wants us to see his gospel as Scripture and as the promise of a new and better seed of Abraham (Genesis 18:10–15).

¹² The Greek word *kōphos* in 1:22 can mean either deaf or mute. We can tell that it means both from the fact that people have to communicate with Zechariah using sign language and a tablet in 1:62–63.

¹³ Gabriel uses the verb *euangelizō* to tell Zechariah literally in 1:19 that he has come to *evangelize* him.

are not Jewish, like Luke and Theophilus, the start of this gospel is fantastic news for you too. It calls you to come down from the spectators' gallery and to take your place in the people that God is preparing for himself. Luke starts his gospel by calling all of us to change our perspective and to see things from where the angel is standing: all these events in the summer of 6 BC happened for you and for me.

The Impossible (1:26–38)

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” The angel answered... “Nothing is impossible with God.”

(Luke 1:34–37)

A judge like Theophilus must have heard some tall stories in his time. The courtrooms of the ancient world were full of them. But in all his years as a judge he cannot have heard a more impossible claim than this one. Luke said a virgin had given birth to a baby.

Even today, many people struggle to believe that this really happened. Rob Bell asks if it might just be *“a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of the Mithra and Dionysian religious cults that were hugely popular at the time of Jesus, whose gods had virgin births?”* He queries whether *“in the Hebrew language at that time, the word ‘virgin’ could mean several things”* or whether *“in the first century being ‘born of a virgin’ also referred to a child whose mother became pregnant the first time she had intercourse?”*¹ Rather than skim over these verses, we therefore need to slow down to consider carefully what Luke is saying. What made him risk his credibility at the very outset of his gospel by asking Theophilus to believe the impossible? These verses suggest at least four reasons.

First, Luke says this as a historian. He knows we will find it difficult to believe what he says happened, so he provides us with a time, a place and a name. He pinpoints the date by telling us that the virgin conceived six months after Zechariah’s wife

¹ Rob Bell asks these questions in *Velvet Elvis* (2005).

– in other words, in January 5 BC.² He pinpoints the location as the town of Nazareth in Galilee – not a city where such things might be missed in the crowd, but a close-knit community of a few hundred people.³ He also tells us the name of the woman involved – the same Mary who was engaged to Joseph, the descendant of David. Luke expects us to believe him because his two years of research forced him to conclude that the impossible had really happened to a particular woman at a particular place and time.

Second, Luke says this as a doctor. When the former tax collector Matthew describes the birth of Jesus in his gospel, he instinctively focuses on how events unfurled for Joseph. Jewish society was segregated by gender, so he naturally told the story from the perspective of the man. Luke’s profession transcended gender barriers. As a doctor, he instinctively approaches childbirth from the woman’s point of view. His reference to *conception* and *delivery* in verse 31 serves to remind us that these are not the words of a primitive fool, but those of someone who has been trained in first-century gynaecology. Luke is fully aware that what he is saying here is medically impossible – that one of Mary’s eggs was fertilized by divine miracle without there being any need for human sperm.

Third, Luke says this as a student of the Old Testament. He does not quote explicitly from the Jewish Scriptures, since that would mean very little to Theophilus, but he clearly has the early prophecies of Isaiah in mind. The angel’s words echo the promise that God would cause a virgin’s son to rule forever on David’s throne over God’s people. Yes, that would be humanly impossible. It would have to be a miracle from God. But the

² Jesus was therefore born in September or October. It’s just tradition to celebrate his birth on 25th December.

³ Matthew 2:23 emphasizes the spiritual significance of Nazareth for Jewish readers. Luke emphasizes its geographical location to help Roman readers to find it on a map and believe what he is saying is real.

prophet declared in triumph that *“The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.”*⁴

Fourth, Luke says this as a scientist who has come to believe in something bigger than science. We might have expected a physician to play down all talk of the supernatural in his gospel, but in fact we find the opposite is true. Luke uses the words for “demons” and “healing” and “the Holy Spirit” more often than any of the other gospel writers. He uses the word “angel” almost as often as the other three combined. He adds several new miracles to those already recorded by Matthew and Mark. Nobody is more diligent than Luke in questioning facts, but nor is anyone more convinced than Luke that heavenly facts trump earthly facts every time God issues a simple command.

Luke explains that Mary conceived through God’s power, because salvation always starts with him and not with us. God announced his plan to her through Gabriel, the same angel that appeared to Zechariah and whose name means *God’s Warrior* or *God’s Strongman*.⁵ Gabriel responds to her horrified expression by assuring her that *“The Lord is with you”* and that *“Mary, you have found favour with God.”* She is to call her baby Jesus, which is Hebrew for *The Lord Saves*, because her virgin birth is the fulfilment of God’s ancient prophecy to Eve that he would save the world through the offspring of a woman, without needing the help of any man.⁶

Mary asks the obvious question: *“How will this be, since I am a virgin?”* She isn’t voicing unbelief, like Zechariah in the Temple, but bewilderment in the face of the impossible. The angel explains that *“The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the*

⁴ Isaiah 7:14; 9:6–7. While Luke just states the facts, Matthew quotes from Isaiah for his Jewish readers.

⁵ Gabriel’s appearance proclaims God’s irresistible power, which is why Daniel, Zechariah and Mary all react with fear to seeing him (Daniel 8:17; Luke 1:12).

⁶ God prophesies over Eve in Genesis 3:15 and declares in Hebrew that *“her seed”* will be the Saviour. He does not prophesy about Adam’s seed because the Saviour would be born without the sperm of any man.

power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."⁷ He doesn't use the language of modern medicine, but Gabriel essentially informs her that the same Holy Spirit through whom the Lord created the physical universe in Genesis 1 will perform a creative miracle inside her womb. He will create a male gamete out of nothing to fertilize the egg within her. Her child will be the Son of God physically as well as spiritually. Luke is not denying medical facts. He is simply insisting that God can overrule them. He is inviting us to believe that God is truly this passionate to save us.

Mary believes that if God can provide a baby for Zechariah in the barren womb of Elizabeth, he can also provide a baby for her in her virginity. She believes that if God's Word was powerful enough to create the universe out of nothing at the dawn of time, it is also powerful enough to create whatever physical matter is needed in her womb to create a baby, without the need of help from any man. She believes the angel's promise when he assures her in verse 37 that *"Nothing is impossible with God."* Although she knows it may mean being rejected by Joseph and by her neighbours in Nazareth, she submits to God's plan: *"I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."*⁸

Luke assures us as a historian and as a doctor that the impossible took place in the town of Nazareth in 5 BC. He invites us to respond with the same humble faith as Mary. He wants us to believe that God is this committed to saving us. All of this happened for you.

⁷ The angel's words in 1:35 are meant to echo the Old Testament accounts of the glory of the Lord descending on the Tabernacle and Temple. The virgin birth singled Jesus out as the holy Son of God.

⁸ Mary was even at risk of being killed by her neighbours. See Deuteronomy 22:21 and John 8:1-11.