

“Uniquely Luke”

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Will you be as ignorant about Jesus at the end of 2018 as you are now?

Luke 1:1-4

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Carefully investigated

When Linda and I first visited Israel in 2011, we came across a chart in a tunnel near the Temple Mount titled “Jerusalem Time.” The chart chronicled Jerusalem history from the Canaanite period to the modern period. I realized I knew something about the time periods covered in the Old Testament, and of course knew at least a little about Jewish history since the 20th century Holocaust. I knew next to nothing about where Jewish people lived and what was happening in Jerusalem in between.

- Why was the Temple Mount vacant for centuries after AD 70?
- When did the Muslims build the Dome of the Rock?
- Where were the Jews living if they weren’t in Palestine?
- What is the difference between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews?
- Who are the Mamluks who ruled Palestine for two Medieval centuries?

Before we led a second tour to Israel in 2014, I wanted to be able to answer those questions. I read books, listened to tapes, talked to Jewish people, and finally gave a Power Point lecture *and* wrote a 19-page paper titled “[Israel: Land and People](#)” for those who went on our second trip as well as anyone else interested. I became very passionate about Jewish history and wanted to share their story with anyone who would listen.

If my Thursday men’s Bible study group is any indication, probably everyone has a similar story. As we went around the room and introduced ourselves, every single guy had some area where he had determined to learn all he could learn and share it with anyone who would listen. For one guy, it was bow hunting; for another, his family genealogy; for a lawyer, whatever background he needed to try a particular case; for a Dad, whatever he needed to know to advocate for his sick child’s treatment.

What has created enough curiosity in you that you had to do your own observation, research, and reading – to the point that you became so passionate you would share what you learned with anyone who would listen? For a first century physician named Luke, that area of interest was the life of Jesus. We have the results of his fact-finding, passion, and writing in the Gospel of Luke.

Luke and Theophilus

When opening Luke's Gospel, you notice right away that his name isn't there. Technically, the Gospel of Luke is an anonymous work, part 1 of a two-part early church history – the life of Jesus and the first decades of the church after Jesus' ascension. Early church tradition, however, along with clear hints in Luke-Acts, give it away.

Putting the pieces together, we know that Luke was a close companion of the Apostle Paul, who tells us Luke was a doctor. We know now he is curious, detailed, knowledgeable, and practical. Doctors become doctors because they're interested in learning facts, but not just random facts. Doctors learn facts that help people. They love details to the extent that the details are useful.

Luke was probably born in Antioch, Syria – a Gentile who became a Jewish convert. At some point, perhaps as a result of the Apostle Paul's ministry but maybe before, he became a believer in Jesus as the Messiah for the Jews and the whole world. His travel with Paul gave him access not only to Paul's teaching about Jesus but to many others who knew Jesus personally during his time on earth and/or shared their stories.

Both Luke and Acts are addressed to someone named "Theophilus." Once again, we wish we knew more. Opinions about Theophilus range from his being a Jewish high priest who became a believer in Jesus to a...well, to nobody. Some believe Theophilus should be literally translated "lover of God," and that Luke is not writing to a person as much as he is to anyone who loves God.

Since Luke addressed Theophilus as "most excellent," and since he uses a singular pronoun "you" when writing to Theophilus, I'm inclined to think he's a real person. I join those who believe Theophilus is an important Roman official, perhaps even Luke's patron or sponsor. Theophilus may have paid not only Luke's salary but may have paid for his education. Whether he was a believer or a seeker, Theophilus had heard Luke speak about Jesus so much that he asked to know more about this Jesus. So Luke decided to research, organize, and write a life of Jesus for his sponsor.

How Luke begins

The Scripture we read this morning is all one sentence in Greek. It's high-class Greek, the kind written to be memorable. Pastor Amy Stickler compared it this week to the opening lines of the Gettysburg Address or the Declaration of Independence. Some scholars say these four verses are the finest Greek in the entire New Testament.

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us... (1). The word “things” captures my attention. The Greek is *pragmata*, from which we get our word “pragmatic” or “practical.” He’s not just writing about “things” (such a bland word), he’s writing about *things that matter*, that will change your life. These “things” have been “fulfilled” or “accomplished.” If you already know the story of the Old Testament, you realize right away he’s saying Jesus’ story to the story of the Jews. Jesus completes that story. But if you don’t get that yet, he hasn’t lost you. Luke will write about some very helpful, life-changing accomplishments.

...just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word (2). We learn now that Luke is not an eyewitness, but he’s connected with eyewitnesses. He has interviewed them. He’s listened to those who talk about Jesus. Luke is saying why you should read him.

With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus (3). Luke has done for this work what I did on Jewish history. He read every written work he could get his hands on, listened to anyone who would talk to him, organized it all into a concise story, and passed it on to curious readers who didn’t have the time or opportunity to investigate personally.

...so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (4). This is a different word for “things” – this one is the plural of *logos*, word or message. Theophilus has been exposed to stories about Jesus, but has wondered whether they are credible. Luke has done the legwork for him, because certainty matters. Certainty especially matters when the subject matter is the Savior of the whole world. Luke’s Gospel will be “useful” because it will strengthen his readers’ certainty about their faith.

Uniquely Luke

I’ve titled this sermon series, “Uniquely Luke.” Luke says he’s investigated what others have written. Most scholars think Luke has read what Mark wrote, mainly because when he tells the same story Mark tells, he tells it almost verbatim. However, he says “*many* have written,” and scholars speculate about other circulated stories.

You’ve probably heard that John is quite different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. I want to know what makes Luke different from Matthew, Mark, and John. Therefore, all the sermons from now through Easter will be from the 30% of Luke that does not appear in Matthew, Mark, or John – or are considerably different in Luke. What makes Luke’s gospel “uniquely Luke”? Here’s a beginning list.

Luke is not a Jew. As far as we know, he’s the only non-Jew who wrote a book of the Bible. His gospel rarely quotes the Old Testament, but often alludes to it, almost always with a clear reference to the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint. This makes a lot of sense for someone who knew Greek but not Hebrew or

Aramaic. He refers to many Jewish traditions and ideas, but always in a way that connects the dots for a non-Jew. Luke is an outsider to Judaism like we are, and he insists this Jewish Messiah belongs to the whole world. This is our gospel.

Luke is not an eyewitness. John and Matthew were two of Jesus' original twelve disciples. Mark was not, but he apparently wrote down what Peter, also one of the Twelve, told him. Luke is different. There's no evidence he ever heard Jesus teach, saw one of Jesus' miracles, or so much as caught a glimpse of Jesus in person.

You may think that makes his writing unreliable. Think again. Thirty years from now, would you rather read a biography of Donald Trump written by Mike Pence, who served as his Vice President, Ivanka Trump, his daughter, Hillary Clinton, a political opponent, or Michael Wolff, who belittles him? Actually, I would be interested in any of those. But suppose someone knew all of them, interviewed both enemies and friends, and wrote objectively after thorough investigation and research? Whether or not the author ended up a Trump believer, the person who listened to all stories from wherever and compiled those with the most credibility would be someone worth reading. That's how Luke presents himself.

Jesus is amazing. Here's another way Luke is unique. According to Michael Card's commentary on Luke, there are five Greek words for "amazing," and Luke employs all of them. Card quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Bewilderment is true comprehension." Whatever fascinates you enough to create passion also creates a restlessness to know more. You're going to be amazed by Jesus when you read Luke.

God's upside down values. Luke writes more about the poor than the other three gospels, and more about the rich as well. Luke consistently contrasts people on top with people on the bottom and says that in Jesus' economy they switch roles. It's not just about physical poverty and wealth, it's also about spiritual poverty and wealth. But make no mistake, it is about physical poverty and wealth. Luke's gospel gives comfort to the have-nots and warning to the haves.

Women, center stage. From Jesus' own mother to the women who bankrolled Jesus' itinerant ministry to Mary and Martha to the women who stayed by his cross and witnessed the empty tomb, Luke writes about and cares about women. It's part of his upside down theme, but it deserves mention. You can't devalue women as servants and leaders and providers and spokespersons when you read Luke.

A Goal for 2018

So here's an idea for you as you begin 2018. Why not pick a topic on which you are going to become an expert? In years past, we've suggested you choose a word for the year. Following Luke's example, how about "investigate" or "study" or "write"?

Here's another way to pose the question. Are you going to be just as ignorant at the end of 2018 as you are now? You know there are new areas to explore. You have curiosities you've never done anything about. Why not make 2018 the year you strive to learn something useful to others? Maybe you need to learn about opioid addiction, or suicide, or grief, or old age. I need to learn all I can about grandparenting...from a distance!

I'm also newly curious about the Palestinians. I realized recently that I spent so much time and energy learning about Israelis and Jewish history that I've become blind to the plight of other human beings for whom Christ died, many of whom are fellow Christians, occupying the same land. Luke challenges me to consider the poor and underserved, not just the powerful and prosperous. I still passionately love Israel, but 2018 is a year in which I want to focus more attention on Palestine.

You may think, "That's not very spiritual." True, and I'm getting there. But let's start with Luke as a curious person. Luke's story didn't begin with writing a Gospel. He never would have written this Gospel, at least not the way he wrote it, if he weren't a physician. And Luke wouldn't have been a physician if he wasn't inquisitive, curious, dedicated, and persistent – not just about knowledge but knowledge that helps people. Knowledge belongs to God. Pursuing any knowledge is ultimately a spiritual journey.

But let's talk specifically about Luke's area of interest and expertise in this Gospel. How could 2018 be a year when you focus attention on Jesus the Messiah? Rather than just soaking in each Sunday what your pastor learned about Jesus from Luke, why not make this a year when you do some first-hand research or reading? Will you be as ignorant *about Jesus* at the end of this year as you are now?

Some of you need more certainty in your faith. You watch a program on the History Channel about Bible history or read something in National Geographic like the December 2017 cover story, "The Real Jesus," and your faith becomes shaken. You hear questions – or maybe even have questions – about why we believe in Jesus, or even in God, or about how reliable the Bible is. A good place to start might be the 2017 film, "[The Case for Christ](#)," which tells the story of Lee Strobel, an antagonistic journalist who became a Christian and an evangelist after researching all the tough questions. Chris Van Allsburg teaches a Sunday School class at Corinth that focuses on tough questions.

Some of you need to dig in to the Luke with us over the next four months. Join one of Corinth's [weekly Bible studies](#), several of which focus on the sermon passage each week. Whether or not you're in one of those groups, I'm recommending Michael Card's lay-friendly commentary, [Luke: The Gospel of Amazement](#). You can order it yourself (\$10.25 on Amazon) or download on Kindle, or if you [email me](#) I'll have a copy mailed to your home this week. Also email me if you don't already receive my weekly study guide for the sermons, distributed on Mondays by email. Don't just come to church; investigate Jesus yourself!

Make it your goal in 2018 to be like Dr. Luke – learn what will be useful to yourself and others. Luke’s highest achievement was learning all he could about the One whose life, death, and resurrection changed history and changes every person who believes in him: Jesus Christ. Amen.