

The Prologue to Christmas

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[0:00] Well, you can be opening your Bibles this morning to the Gospel according to Luke.

! Luke chapter 1. And this will mark the first sermon in a series of sermons. I'm not sure how long it will take.

As I preach through the Gospel according to Luke. I've tried to time the beginning of this so that it could be in Luke 2, the latter part of Luke 1, and on into Luke 2 through kind of the Christmas season.

And I think that's the way it ought to be. I mean, we don't want to maybe necessarily preach through Luke chapter 2 in the middle of the summer somewhere. It just seemed like it ought to go with Christmas.

And so I've timed it this way. And so if you'll find Luke chapter 1 and our text this morning is verses 1 through 4. And we'll read that in just a moment. But, you know, essentially, now hear me out here, but essentially the Thanksgiving holiday is a prologue or an introduction to the Christmas season.

[1:26] It really is that. It has become that anyway. In fact, in terms of how we celebrate Thanksgiving Day, it looks very much like the way we celebrate Christmas Day.

Now tell me I'm wrong. Okay? Pretty much the same. For example, on Thanksgiving Day, families gather at Grandma's house or maybe the house of some other member of the family. And we get together.

That is, of course, if they're not camping out on the sidewalk of the nearest Best Buy. You know, some have chosen to do that this Christmas and do, I guess, every Christmas, getting ready for Black Thursday.

Although, really, Friday rather, really it started on Thursday, didn't it? How many of you, I wrote you and asked this, how many of you went shopping on Thursday after 8 o'clock?

Don't, all right, we've got one honest person out here. Anywho, if you weren't doing that on, you know, Thursday, then you were in your home with family celebrating Thanksgiving and, you know, we do that and we eat food and desserts until we nearly pop.

[2:44] And then, you know, we sit around the living room snoozing or watching football on TV. Now tell me it's not so for you. And, really, Christmas Day, when we get to Christmas Day, the routine is pretty much the same for many of us.

Now, I know before you object, I understand that this is a gross oversimplification of both holidays and the way they're celebrated. I understand that. And for many of you, hopefully all of you, it's an unfair generalization.

I mean, because, you know, for many of us here in this room, hopefully, the way I described how these holidays are celebrated typically, that, you know, for many of us that's trivializing it.

And yet, sadly, I think that's not far off the mark for many Americans today. But what I want to do here is to merely point out that we celebrate the two holidays in very similar ways with one or maybe a two-fold difference in how we celebrate Christmas Day.

And that two-fold difference would be decorations, though we do decorate for Thanksgiving. I understand that. But more so for Christmas. So the two differences would be decorations and gift-giving.

[4:10] Right? The difference between Christmas Day and Thanksgiving Day. Primarily. Decorations and gift-giving, both of which presumably point to the unique object of how we celebrate Christmas.

Right? Namely, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. His incarnation. His first advent into our world. He is the light to the world.

Right? Jesus is the light to the world. I guess you could say the most dazzling of adornments. Or I might put it in these terms, the brightest decoration of the glory of God.

And certainly, the supreme gift of God's wondrous grace. That's Christmas. And so again, I say in a sense, Thanksgiving Day is a prologue, an introduction to the Christmas season, and especially to Christmas Day itself.

It is kind of a preparation time. It kind of launches us, for better or for worse, right motives, wrong motives, launches us into the Christmas season and the celebration of Christmas.

[5:24] Now, I've said that to say this. Luke chapter 1, verses 1 through 4, represents a prologue. A prologue, an introduction to the story of Christmas.

Now, certainly an introduction to way more than just the Christmas story, that is the birth of Christ, but it serves as a prologue, an introduction into this season that we are now in.

And so these verses point us, kind of point us in the right direction. We're now headed toward the celebration of the birth of Christ. And so these verses, I think, would suggest to you, lay an important foundation, not only for our understanding and our approach to the book in its entirety, but also a preparation, a foundation for the story of the birth of Christ, which we'll get into in the next few weeks.

I would even say that these verses establish the truthfulness. Now, this is what we ought to get here. This is a good introduction.

These verses, verses 1 through 4, we're going to read them here in a moment, establish the truthfulness, the absolute accuracy of the story of Christmas.

[6:53] Now, you do have some sense that to the majority of people in our country today, the Christmas story is little more than just a fable.

I'm talking about the biblical story of the birth of Christ. To many in our country today, and a growing number I would suggest, to them, the story of the birth of Christ, especially as it's portrayed or described in Luke chapter 2, which is, by the way, our only real full description of it, that this story in Luke chapter 2 is really little more than a beloved children's story.

A fable. A fanciful story. A precious moments. Christmas card. That's really all it is to many people today.

But Luke says, it's all true. It's all true. Every part of the story is true. Every detail of the story is true. Every word of it is absolutely true. Now, Luke 1, verses 1 through 4, lays the foundation, an important foundation for that.

[8:07] These verses, again, establish the truthfulness, the absolute accuracy of the story of Christmas. And, of course, not only that, but also the full story of Christ as recorded in the remainder, the balance of the book.

And also Luke's second volume. Did you know there's a second volume? It's the book of Acts. Second volume to Luke's account of the Gospel.

Luke establishes the birth and ministry of Christ and all the way to His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. And the book of Acts, of course, details the birth of the church and the spread of the Gospel, the advance of the Gospel to the entire world.

And so these verses are very important. Verses 1 through 4. It really serves as an introduction for both volumes, I would suggest to you. They represent an important introduction to the story of Christ.

So let's read the text. Luke 1, verses 1 through 4. Luke writes, "...inasmuch as many have taken in hand," or they've kind of undertaken the task, "...to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us or accomplished among us.

[9:37] Just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all the things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed." This is the introduction to the book.

An important prologue to the Christmas story which we're going to get into in the next several weeks. A story that is already on our minds.

We're already reminded of it. And if you've not already put out the nativity scenes in your home, you're going to be in the next couple of days or so. And so we're going to be reminded of the story. And so this is a prologue to that story, the story of the birth of Christ. You see, Luke is not writing his account of the birth of Christ to create some kind of emotional response in us in hopes that we will

want to believe it.

That's not what this is about. Kind of like we might listen to the story or see a movie about Santa Claus and get all emotional inside, maybe even teary-eyed a little bit and say, Oh, I wish it were true!

[10:55] Sorry, kids. I thought you'd be in children's church this morning. It is true. You know what I'm talking about? Kind of on the basis of emotion.

Oh, just to get all wrapped up into the story and think of it only in an emotional sense. This is not Luke's intent here in this gospel account.

And especially that part that focuses on the birth of Christ, those events leading up to the birth of Christ. Luke's account of the birth of Christ is indeed a literary masterpiece.

It really is. The reader is literally drawn into the story. We can almost see the stable there. We can almost smell the hay and the barnyard animals.

We can almost visualize Mary kneeling by that feeding trough and Joseph, her husband, standing there beside her with his arm on her shoulder and they're both looking down into that manger and they look into the face of that precious little baby lying there.

[12:09] We can see all of that. It reads, I tell you, it reads like a storybook, doesn't it? And its images are very pastoral and serene, even surreal, really, when you think about it, and alluring, evoking emotion as we read the story.

But we're to believe it. We're to believe it to be true, not because of the masterful way in which Luke wrote it, and he certainly did, but we are to believe it because it is true.

It's factual. Or as Luke puts it, it is the exact truth that he's writing to us here. We're to believe it on that basis.

And so let's see how Luke lays this foundation, this foundation for the truthfulness of the Christmas story, even before we get into the story itself. And maybe that will help guard us from kind of just approaching it on an emotional level and failing to embrace once again the incredible truth of this story and the significance of that truth.

All right, so a foundation for the truthfulness of the Christmas story, and not, of course, just the story of the birth of Christ, but the whole of the gospel itself. Now, I want to take these four verses this morning and draw from them four foundational characteristics of the gospel according to Luke.

[13:50] Four foundational characteristics of it. This is what Luke is doing. Here's number one. The relevant substance of this narrative, this story.

The relevant substance. Luke wrote in verse 1, he said, Inasmuch as many have taken in hand, they've undertaken the task to set in order a narrative.

That's how it's translated in the New King James. A narrative to set in order. A narrative. Or a story. But as I'm going to point out, more than just a story. The King James, I believe, has the word declaration. Which, by the way, is a good translation. It's more than a story.

It's a declaration of those things that have been accomplished, is what Luke is saying here. New American Standard just uses the word account. If you have that version, you see that.

[14:54] Many have undertaken to compile an account. And that's basically what this is. What he's saying. But whatever word you use, whether it's narrative or story or account or declaration or other words, here is the point I want to make.

What follows after this introduction, these four verses of introduction, what follows is more than just a story. Indeed, indeed, though it is thought by many readers of all stripes and all religious beliefs, it's thought to be a great story, it's more than just simply the greatest story ever told.

It's more than that. John MacArthur put it well when he said, the world, frankly, is full of stories.

Some are compelling, moving, impactful, even capable of changing how we think and how we act.

But there's really only one story that transcends time and space, that transcends the material world to affect people eternally. And that is the story that Luke writes.

And it is, indeed, the greatest story ever told. Now, this greatest story ever told is, of course, the Gospel.

[16:11] The Gospel. In the broadest sense of the word. The Gospel as in the entire, the complete revelation of God's redemptive plan. Which, by the way, starts in Genesis 1-1 and ends all the way to the end of the book.

Revelation. It's the Gospel. The whole of God's redemptive plan. And Luke was inspired by the Holy Spirit of God to write two volumes, as I've said, Luke and Acts.

Now, some have called this a metanarrative. Jot that down. No, you don't have to.

A metanarrative. Some have called this a metanarrative. Now, that term is generally associated with postmodernism and post-liberalism.

But, I think, in a sense, it's a good word to describe the Gospel. The Gospel is a metanarrative.

[17 : 15] Meta meaning beyond, above, even about, and, of course, the idea then being a narrative that is beyond, above, all other narratives.

A narrative that is about all other narratives. That's very interesting, I think, when you think about it. The Gospel is, then, the overarching narrative.

The metanarrative that reveals the meaning of all other narratives. And how we're to interpret all other narratives. It is what we might call a biblical worldview.

The metanarrative. The Gospel. For example, how, by the way, are we to accurately evaluate all the things going on in the Middle East?

I mean, right now, currently, this fighting between Hamas and Israel. How do we evaluate that narrative? And we hear a number of narratives on the news, the major news networks, and this narrative, and that narrative, and there's a Christian narrative, and so forth.

[18 : 25] How are we to evaluate that narrative, that story? Or, how are we to correctly evaluate the various narratives being played out before us in government?

Or politics? Or education? Or the culture? Our culture? Or religion itself?

The various narratives out there about that. See, everyone and everything has its own narrative being played out on the stage of human history. Narratives that people believe in. Narratives that people live by. Narratives that shape opinion about various things. Narratives that form conclusions and so forth. But there is only one overarching narrative, meta-narrative, that stands in judgment over all other narratives.

and it's the gospel. The gospel narrative. The only narrative that really matters. The only narrative that is relevant. And why is that?

[19 : 31] Well, Luke tells us. Because it is a narrative of those things that have been fulfilled. That's what he says. Or those things that have been accomplished.

What things? Divine things. They're all a part of God's redemptive plan. See, all these things. He's saying this is a narrative about all the things that have been accomplished among us. That have been fulfilled among us. Listen, folks. The gospel narrative is about God's gracious plan to save sinners from His righteous and eternal judgment in hell through the coming of His eternal Son, Jesus Christ, to die and to rise again from the dead and to one day judge all and men to all sin and bring His beloved Son into the blessedness of eternity with Him again.

I'm about to lose something here. No matter what. Now, that story that I very briefly kind of laid out and described some of the high points of it, that story, that narrative is true.

Dear people, it's true. It's factual. And therefore, man, can't help. Shall I start over?

[21 : 04] No. Don't do that. I will go back just a little bit. That story, the one I just described, God's gracious redemption of His beloved through the sacrifice of His Son so that we might spend eternity with Him in heaven.

And that story, that narrative is true and therefore the most relevant story you will ever hear. This world will ever hear.

And under which all other narratives, all other stories must be evaluated. A meta-narrative. This is the story that Luke is about to write to us.

The relevant substance of his narrative. That's number one. Number two, the reliable sources of his narrative.

The reliable sources of his narrative. Now, what does Luke tell us? Well, let's read verse one again and add to it verse two. Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us.

[22 : 16] That's verse two. Or now verse two. Just as those who, now pay attention to this, those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us.

That is, these narratives were delivered to us. Now, verse two primarily is Luke's primary statement concerning the accuracy and the reliability of his gospel account.

That's his statement of it. Now, let me give you this morning five specific references concerning Luke's sources in writing his narrative, his gospel.

Five references or really five sources. And each one testifies to the reliability of Luke's account, his account of the gospel.

Here's source number one. And I think you would agree as I name each one of these, you say, well, these make viable sources for any kind of reliable document that might be written.

[23:20] Here's source number one, written documents. Written documents are very important sources, are they not, for any kind of historical writing?

Now, Luke referred to these in verse one. He said, many, he doesn't specify how many, but many have undertaken the task to, as it were, compile a narrative.

A narrative of what? The life of Christ. The things of Christ. Many have done so. Now, just who these other writers were, Luke doesn't tell us. How many there were, he doesn't tell us.

Scholars have, by the way, attempted to identify some of these other accounts of the gospel, these other written sources. It is, I think, safe to conclude that Mark's gospel was one of them.

Some would say that Luke heavily relied upon Mark. Matthew would be another one. These two gospel writings had already been published, as it were, before Luke wrote his, and so I think there is a reference to either Matthew or Mark, or both.

[24:30] But it really doesn't matter. The point is this. When Luke wrote his gospel account, there were other similar documents out there available to his readers, and these other written accounts would corroborate the factuality of Luke's account.

And this is an important source. The written documents. Then source number two, eyewitness accounts. Eyewitness accounts. Luke said in verse two, there were those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses.

He mentions eyewitnesses. Now he doesn't name them. I think we can read through the gospel of Luke and also his second volume, the book of Acts, and we could probably identify who some of these witnesses were.

Eyewitnesses were that Luke personally drew upon, or drew from. But there were eyewitnesses, and by the way, it's plural. Eyewitnesses plural. There were a number of them, and eyewitnesses, of course, represent a pretty good source, reliable source, right?

Now Luke then not only borrowed from certain reliable written sources available to him, but he also relied upon a number of actual eyewitnesses, people who were apparently there with Jesus.

[25:50] They were there, and they saw the unfolding of the history of Jesus Christ, and so Luke says that these eyewitnesses were there from the beginning.

That's what he said, from the beginning. Not just the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, but from the beginning of the beginning. That is, his birth. They were there at his birth. That's why Luke could give us such a detailed account of the birth of Christ, and even some of those events that preceded it.

And where did he get the information for that? Well, I think Mary, for one. I think Luke sat down with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and she shared with him all those things that were very private to her, because no one else was present.

That is, her visitation from the angel, and what the angel said to her, and the things that occurred there at the birth of Christ. And so I think Luke sat down with Mary, the mother of Jesus, probably sat down with Zacharias and Elizabeth to get some of the details about that, and the birth of John the Baptist.

We don't have an account of this in any of the other Gospels, and maybe Simeon and Anna, and we could go on. That's just simply focusing on the Christmas story itself, and some of the eyewitnesses that are mentioned there in Luke's account.

[27:07] And so he drew upon eyewitnesses as he wrote. Eyewitnesses are good, reliable sources for any history, and I think Luke collected many, many other eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life, his ministry, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and all of it.

So, written documents, eyewitness accounts, and third, source number three, testimonials from close associates.

They make pretty good, I think, pretty good, reliable sources. Testimonials of close associates.

Luke called them, in verse 2, ministers of the word, or servants of, some translations have the word gospel.

Ministers, servants of the gospel, and these, of course, I think, would have included the testimonials of those who served alongside of Jesus during his public ministry.

That would include the several women that accompanied Jesus and served his needs and the apostles' needs. That would include other disciples that were following Jesus everywhere he went. [28:20] That would certainly include the apostles themselves. These were close associates of the Lord Jesus Christ, and Luke drew his sources from them.

Luke would have had access, no doubt, to verbal testimonials, those who were still alive. He would have access to written testimonials, oral traditions passed on by friends and relatives of the apostles and others who ministered alongside of Jesus.

So, testimonials of close associates. Source number four, personal investigations. personal investigations. That is, Luke himself was a source, became a source, a reliable source.

How so? Well, Luke said in verse three, it seemed good or fitting to me also, having had, this is how it's translated here, having had perfect understanding of all those things, all things from the very first.

And so it's fitting to him to write an orderly account. A perfect understanding. And what does that mean? Well, Luke is being very deliberate here. Luke is not mincing words.

[29:41] Literally, he's saying, I was not content to rely on documents, written documents, not content just to rely upon the word of mouth of eyewitnesses and close associates of Jesus.

He's saying, I personally investigated everything carefully. Personally. This is what Luke is saying. Luke checked his facts. Don't you wish other historians would do that? He checked his facts. Luke, I think, followed or operated according to this principle, trust but verify.

That's a pretty good principle to operate. Trust but verify. And so, personal investigations, and that leads to a fifth and final source, and really more so a method than a source, but here it is, source number five, unbiased reporting.

Luke makes a statement about that. Unbiased reporting. According to verse four, Luke's intent was to carefully investigate personally, and then to present in written form the, and this is a literal, more literal translation, the undoubted truth.

[31:03] New American Standard has it, exact truth. I want to present to you, he's saying, to Theophilus and all other readers, I want to present to you, that includes all of us right here, a written account of the exact truth.

the undoubted truth. That's what the word *osphileia*, *osphileia* in the Greek means, undoubted truth. Now, folks, let's consider that Luke was a Gentile, he was not a Jew, and Luke had fully embraced the truth of the gospel.

gospel. He was a believer, a follower of Christ, no doubt about it, and he was so even before he investigated the facts and wrote his account.

And so he didn't investigate all of these eyewitnesses and written documents and then put together an account of it and then consider it himself and then become a believer. He was a believer before he wrote.

[32:12] You say, well, that sounds like, you know, a precursor to bias. And that's why I think Luke is saying what he said here. Luke was even a close associate of Paul.

Remember, in the book of Acts, Luke traveled with Paul on his missionary journey, several of them. In fact, it was Luke who was the only one with Paul up to his very death.

Luke was a committed believer. But that did not cause him to deal with the facts loosely. That is to say, his gospel account that we have here, Luke and the book of Acts, was not skewed by his own Christian bias.

That's what he's saying here. This is the exact truth. And so he's saying to Theophilus, take it or leave it, believe it or not, but these are the unbiased facts, the unvarnished truth about the birth and life and death and resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ and beyond that the truth about the birth of the church and the spread and advance of the gospel to the world.

The exact truth. So we're talking about the foundational characteristics of the book of Luke, the relevant substance of it.

[33:39] the reliable sources of it. And then number three, the readable style or structure of his narrative.

The readable style. This is very interesting. But Luke wrote his prologue, that's verses one through four, his introduction. He wrote it in a very polished form of Greek, commonly called literary classical Greek.

That's very interesting. Verses one through four. Literary classical Greek. But then when Luke picked up his pen to start with verse five and then continue on through the end of his account in Luke and then also his book of Acts, he changed his style of writing to what is called Koine Greek or common Greek.

The language of the common people. Isn't that interesting? And why would he do that? Well, the Bible tells us that Luke was a physician. And so because he was a physician, he was a highly educated man.

And he would have no doubt have mastered classical Greek. And so he uses his scholarship, his educated mind, to establish his book as a product of serious scholarship.

[35 : 09] That's why he used that form at the beginning. Something that should be respected. Something that would be credible. And then having done that and established this as a scholarly endeavor, this history of the birth of Christ, and life of Christ and so forth, having done that, he changes the style because his chief desire is not scholarship, it is readability.

So that the most common of people could read it and understand it. He said in verse three to write to you an orderly account, and it certainly is that, but it's not void of earthiness and feeling.

Or as one has put it, it's not void of flower and fragrance, the way Luke wrote. The gospel, according to Luke, is not some boring history book written by some brainy historian.

It is written with feeling, but also according to fact. So that the reader should engage with the story of Luke with the head and the heart.

And Luke writes it in such a way so that it lends itself to that kind of an approach. And that's the way it ought to be. In fact, I would argue that the entire Bible is written that way. And we need to wrap this up this morning.

[36 : 45] Fourth and finally, there is first the relevant substance of this narrative, the reliable sources of this narrative, the readable style and structure of this narrative, and then, most importantly, the redemptive strategy of this narrative.

The redemptive strategy. verse 3 again, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty, the exact truth of those things in which you were instructed.

Now, just who Theophilus was, we don't know. We don't know his identity. Luke addresses both of his volumes to this man by the name of Theophilus.

We don't know who he was. I think it's clear that he was a real person. It's not symbolic of a group of people, but a real person. And because Luke addressed him as, quote, most excellent Theophilus, it is very likely that he was a high-ranking government official.

It was a title, an address that really in Scripture for sure is only associated with high government officials.

[38 : 15] So, Theophilus, I think, was a real person. It may be that this was not his real name. It could be that it was an alias.

The word Theophilus means friend of God. Theo, the word for God, Philus, friend, or maybe even lover. Friend of God or lover of God.

It's not clear whether or not Theophilus was a true believer. I think because of the way what Luke wrote here, I think he was not necessarily a true believer.

But he was considering all the facts. He'd been instructed in all of the truths of the gospel. And so Luke is writing possibly to convince him. and not just him, but all other readers.

Luke wrote at the close of his prologue of the book, he said, it seemed good to me to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that, or so that, you may what?

[39 : 26] Know. so that you may know. Know the certainty, the exact truth, of those things to which you have been or were instructed.

I think Luke is very redemptive in describing his strategy for this narrative. And not just the story of the birth of Christ, but the entire story of Christ.

And that Theophilus and all others who would read his account, would learn, that is, be instructed, but that they would know, that is, know for certainty the exact truth of what they have been instructed in, and this is implied that they would believe it.

That they would believe it. That's Luke's redemptive strategy. It is the strategy of the whole of God's word. It's not only a story, an account of God's redemptive plan from cover to cover, but it is also

written that we might believe it.

Believe it. To be persuaded. This was his strategy. To persuade his readers to believe. To believe. To know for certainty. And to believe.

[40:47] And listen, faith is a personal acceptance and readiness to act upon what one is persuaded to be true. That's what Luke desires.

And not just for Theophilus. And not just for his immediate readers in his century, but for all readers since, including every one of us.

Luke provides an example of this in the book of Acts and his account of the gospel taking root in Philippi. In Acts 16, 14, he recorded the Lord, is what he said, the Lord opened Lydia's heart to respond to the things, the truths spoken by Paul.

And that's Luke's intent here as well. And so what an excellent prologue to the Christmas story.

Before we ever get to it, there are many who know it, I mean, have known it from birth.

And there are many who have been taught it and there are many who have learned the facts of it, but not all know it to be the exact truth. They think it is little more than just a touching story.

[42:02] But it's more than that. It's more than just a kind of emotional story on the level of Santa Claus. There are many who have not accepted it as the undoubted truth, and there is, on the part of many, no readiness to act upon that truth in belief, in faith.

There is no willingness on the part of many today, many who would meet out in the shopping malls this holiday, no willingness to respond to the story of Christmas in the same way that, for example, Martha responded to Jesus in John 11, 27, when she said, Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, the One who has come into the world.

Have you responded to this story in that way? Yes, I believe. You are the Christ, the Son of the living God who is to come into the world.

you are the Christ, of the