

Prayer

We praise You, O God, for the presence of Your Holy Spirit deep within us; creating, sustaining, encouraging, uplifting and healing our souls in the midst of all we experience. May we honour this work of the Holy Spirit, welcome His presence, and allow Him to guide our thoughts, actions and feelings. O God, may Your Spirit burst into life within us like a fire, and alight on us like a dove. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Pray about your home, and everything you possess. Ask the Lord to help you use it all for Him

On-going prayers

- **Pray for pioneering scientists.** *Pray for those who work in genetics, and probe the mysteries of human identity. Pray for the respect of life.*
- *Give thanks for teachers who work daily to help children grow*
- *Pray about the increasing political concern over nuclear fuel in Iran*

Meditation

Where are You leading, Holy Spirit?

Take me on a journey that follows the steps of saints;
Let me learn from their godly endurance and character,
And through their powerful example, be filled with hope.

Where are You leading, Holy Spirit?

Take me to those places where I would not normally go;
Let me learn from the wide variety of real human life,
And better understand God's great mission to His world.

Where are You leading, Holy Spirit?

Take me deeper into the sacred truths of the Word of God;
Let me learn that You have more to say than I can ever know,
And discover the eternal truths upon which our world is built.

Where are You leading, Holy Spirit?

Take me on a journey which passes through time to glory;
Let me glimpse with hope and joy our final aim and destiny,
And live today because I trust in You completely for tomorrow.

Bible passage – Luke 1:1-4

¹ *Since many have attempted to write an orderly narrative of what has happened among us, ² insofar as those who from the beginning were eye-witnesses and servants of the Word handed them down to us, ³ I therefore decided that having followed everything with care for a long time, that I should write an orderly narrative for you, O Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the full truth about the things you have been told.*

Thought for the Day

Text

Luke 1:3,4

I therefore decided ... that I should write an orderly narrative for you, O Theophilus, so that you may know the full truth about what you have been told.

Thought

The beginning of Luke's Gospel contains a wonderful introduction telling us about Luke's intent to write 'an orderly narrative' telling people about the life of Christ. Luke wrote Acts as well, and these two great books of the New Testament are invaluable to our faith.

Luke was one of the first people to be systematic and thorough in research about Jesus, and his example is important. We would be wise to follow Luke's example and make sure of the facts of our faith, about what we believe and why. We must be ready to 'give an answer' for our faith, whenever required.

Bible Study

Review

It is always exciting to begin the study of a Gospel. Luke's Gospel is said to be the most loved of Gospels, largely because Luke describes Jesus as a man who has a deep understanding of all those around Him. He makes insightful comments on matters of health, he records details about women as well as men, and he often comments on Jesus' feelings as well as his actions. In addition, some of the great stories of Christian faith are only found in Luke's Gospel, for example, the 'Good Samaritan' (10:30-37), and the 'Prodigal Son' (15:1-32). And as we will shortly find out, Luke begins his Gospel with a lengthy and detailed account of Jesus' birth and early childhood (in chapters 1 and 2); he includes, for example, the powerful stories of the blessing of Jesus in the Temple (2:22f.) and His escapades as a young teenager at his first Passover in Jerusalem (2:40-52). Without Luke's meticulous work to track down and record such stories, they would have been lost to future generations (see 1:1,2).

Remarkably, Luke was neither a Jew nor one of the first disciples of Christ, so who was he? Stories from the early days of the church suggest he may have been one of the seventy disciples commissioned by Jesus (10:1f.), or perhaps one of the Gentiles introduced to Jesus by Philip (John 12:20), but the Bible itself does not tell us any more about Luke. Our passage today simply says that he was not an original disciple himself (1:2), he gained his information about Jesus from eye-witnesses and other 'servants of Jesus' within the church.

Luke is mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament three times, in Colossians. 4:14, 2 Timothy. 4:11 and Philemon. 1:24, where the apostle Paul describes him as a 'the beloved physician' and a 'fellow worker' in the Gospel who remained faithful to him even when he was imprisoned in Rome (see Acts 28). Eusebius, the early church historian, records that Luke came from Antioch, which is as much as we know of him from Acts 13:1 if the 'Lucius' mentioned there is the same person as Luke. In summary, we know little about Luke, but we can be certain that he was a Gentile not a Jew, and he was a doctor. There is a long list of names in Colossians 4 in which Paul specifically identifies him as a 'non-Jew', and the same passage also confirms that Luke was a doctor (Col 4:14). This is fascinating, of course, but we should be careful. The profession of being a doctor was not held in the same high esteem in which it is held today.

One thing becomes very clear as soon as we begin to read the Gospel. Luke was clearly a man of high intelligence, who was capable of writing good and stylish Greek. Indeed, the opening of Luke's Gospel (1:1-4) is generally regarded by scholars today as an example of impressive writing. His contribution to the Bible as a whole is significantly far more than the Gospel which bears his name, for Luke also wrote 'the Acts of the Apostles', a fact that becomes obvious from the first two verses of each work. Together, these two great books of the Bible must be thought of as one great body of work, unparalleled in the New Testament. If the Bible would be sorely lacking without his great Gospel, it would be impoverished without Acts, and its matchless description of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the story of the church in its earliest years.

It is worth taking the opportunity to think about why Luke wrote not just his Gospel, but both 'Luke' and 'Acts', something that is normally done when studying the book of Acts. Both books begin in a similar way and are addressed to Theophilus, but who was Theophilus? One theory (out of many) is that this name was a 'title' for the Roman Emperor, meaning 'Lover of God', and the two books were written as 'evidence' to be provided to the Emperor at Paul's trial on charges of sedition (see Acts 25:11,12). This idea partly explains why the book of Acts appears to peter out towards its end, with a description of Paul living peacefully in Rome, imprisoned but notably not 'living off the state' (Acts 28:16f.!) If we look elsewhere in the New Testament we will find that while living in Rome before his trial, Paul was assisted by Luke (1 Tim 4:11). We can well imagine that he was studiously compiling his records to prepare a defence for Paul before the Emperor. The Bible does not give us sufficient evidence for anyone to claim this theory as fact, but it intriguing and worth our consideration.

Whatever its origins, the first four verses of Luke's Gospel speak not just to one person who was a 'Lover of God' (Theophilus), they speak to us now so that we might all 'know the truth' (1:4) about Jesus.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Luke's 'orderly narrative' (1:1)
- The 'witnesses and servants of the Word' (1:2)
- Writing 'with care' for Theophilus (1:3)
- The 'full truth about the things you have been told' (1:4)

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V1 'has happened'

The Greek word 'ekdieketai' usually means 'to bring to completeness'. In this sentence, it refers to the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection that at the time of Luke's writing, have been completed. Because they are in the past, we would say today that they have 'happened', hence my translation. Some Bible versions translate this 'fulfilled', but the sentence does not need this extra emphasis on completion.

V2 'servants'

The Greek word 'huperetas' means 'helper, assistance, minister, or servant'; that is, someone who acts under orders, and in this case, the orders of the 'Word', meaning Christ. You will find that the different Bible versions tend to translate this 'servants' or 'ministers', but I have chosen 'servants' because to some people 'ministers' suggests church leaders.

Significant phrases

V1 'write an orderly narrative'

Other translations:

'draw up an account of' (NIV)

'set down an orderly account of' (NRSV)

The two Greek words used here refer to writing down a story in a systematic manner, so it is unwise to translate this without reflecting the idea of something done in a methodical way. You can see this in the NRSV, but the NIV does not help the reader understand the importance of this approach. From the point of view of the times, the Gospels are systematic biography.

V4 'about the things you have been told'

Other translations:

'the things you have been taught' (NIV)

'the things about which you have been instructed' (NRSV)

You may be surprised that I have not included the idea of instruction here. However, the Greek word used here ('katecho') means to 'inform, tell, instruct or teach' according to the setting. Here, I think it doubtful that Luke would write to a high ranking Roman official (see study) by referring to something 'taught'; to suggest they needed instruction would be demeaning. For this reason, I prefer to use the least forceful interpretation of the word, which is to 'tell', hence my translation 'what you have been told'.

Going Deeper

Luke's 'orderly narrative' (1:1)

Luke's opening statement is quite revealing. Certainly, we know that Luke was not the first to write a Gospel, because he says clearly that 'many' have attempted to write down a story of the life of Jesus before him.

The dating of the Gospels is a difficult problem, and despite the research of many scholars over many years, it has proved impossible to say which one was written when. It is possible to examine the individual stories that are found in more than one Gospel, to compare them, and reach some conclusions about which was

written first, but such study has yielded mixed results. The most common scholarly consensus that can be found (if indeed it still exists) is that Mark was written first (perhaps 55-65 AD) and then Matthew, with John reckoned to be last (towards the end of first century) and Luke being written at some unknown point between Mark and John. It is well known that many other 'Gospels' were written in the first century, and some of them still exist, having been copied by various communities during the first few centuries of the church. However, the church as a whole realised as soon as the second century AD that the combination of 'Matthew, Mark, Luke and John' were a spiritually complete record of the life of Jesus.

It seems that Luke wrote his Gospel after careful research, and set out to write an 'orderly' narrative. What does he mean by this? If we read Luke's Gospel through at one reading, we will be hard pushed to find within it the same degree of literary structure as we find, for example, in Matthew (with its five teaching blocks relating to the 'Law' of the Old Testament). The best structure we can suggest is this;

1. Jesus' ministry begins in Galilee (chapters 3 to 9)
2. Jesus goes to Jerusalem, teaching and healing on the way (chapters 10-19)
3. Jesus teaches in Jerusalem (chapters 19-21)
4. Jesus is taken capture, is crucified and raised in Jerusalem (chapters 22 to the end).

Most of this is not new to us if we have read Mark and Matthew, however. For this reason, it may well be that Luke's contribution to the overall story of Jesus is his addition of new material, gained by research, perhaps by speaking to 'eye-witnesses and servants'. As a consequence, he certainly adds new stories (as mentioned above), but we will also find that he adds to existing stories known by Mark or Matthew.

The 'witnesses and servants of the Word' (1:2)

It is remarkable that Luke's Gospel was accepted by the early church, given that he was a Gentile, and not connected personally to the events of Jesus' life. The other three Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John were written by people who knew Jesus either as disciples themselves (as with Matthew and John) or amongst those who followed him (as reckoned of Mark, who is believed to have told Peter's stories about Jesus). Because of this, Luke's mention of 'witnesses and servants' is extremely important. It was essential that Luke show that his stories were sourced from those who knew what happened.

The term 'eye-witnesses' is straightforward, and it refers to all those who would have seen Jesus at work, teaching and preaching. Obviously, their testimony was crucial to Luke. Added to this is the evidence of 'servants', and here, Luke used a Greek word different from the one frequently used in the New Testament for a servant ('doulos'), a word that can also mean 'slave'. Instead, he used a word meaning 'assistant' or 'helper' in a general sense (for details, see translation notes above). It is possible that this allowed him to include the testimony of people such as Paul, with whom he clearly spent much time. There is no undisputed evidence of Paul's influence on Luke's Gospel, but the phrase itself is evidence that Luke had a broader understanding of the revelation of Jesus Christ and its application to the world than many of his day. Perhaps this is one reason why it is so loved by later generations.

Writing 'with care', for Theophilus (1:3)

In verse 3, Luke reinforces his credentials for writing the Gospel, citing his care in compiling his account over 'a long time'. This phrase suggests to us that Luke was a far more 'modern' person than we might think, being someone who was willing to use a methodology in order to produce an accurate report! However, a number of studies have been done that suggest the first four verses of Luke are similar to formal documents presented to high Roman authorities on matters of great importance (see the preface of Howard Marshal's commentary on Luke). Luke may well have copied the formally correct way of presenting what we might call 'a paper', but certainly, his use of language pushes us a little further towards the idea that the Gospel was originally written for Paul's defence at the Emperor's court. Even if this was the case, it is likely that Luke wrote knowing that his work would be seen and read by more than just the man for whom it was written. This was a report that was to be copied and spread around, and not left in one place to gather dust on a shelf!

It is reasonably well known that the Gospel was apparently written for someone named 'Theophilus', moreover, that this is not a recognised Roman (or Greek) name, and also that translated, it means 'Lover of God'. It has often been assumed that the name 'Lover of God' could be a generalised name for anyone who wants to know more about God, but although this is fascinating, I doubt if this was the reason why Luke wrote the Gospel or used this name. It has also been suggested that this was the name or title of an unknown patron, someone who asked for this work to be completed for his personal benefit. However, the most likely explanation is that the 'patron' was indeed someone connected with the Emperor's court, and the Gospel was written to defend both the church and Paul, its ambassador in Rome, at a time when the church was beginning to make inroads into Roman society. We can never prove that it was written for Paul's defence, but it is the best explanation available to us.

The 'full truth about what you have been told' (1:4)

The last verse of the introduction has always been a matter of debate. If some anonymous patron commissioned the work, having first heard about Jesus Christ, why this person need to 'know the full truth about the things you have been told'? The pattern of the early church was to preach the Gospel, call for repentance and baptise converts. The need described by Luke indicates someone who had not made up his mind. It is hard to see how this justifies the effort. Certainly, if Luke had said 'so that you and others may know the truth ...', then we would have a clear evangelistic motive for the work.

Yet again, these words suggest that the Gospel is to be presented to someone who does not necessarily believe the story, but is willing to hear it favourably as an inquirer after truth. This would certainly apply to the Emperor, or those charged with presenting Paul's case at court. We should recall that Paul was charged with disturbing the peace of the Empire by preaching Christ as resurrected from the dead (see Acts 25), and this accusation could account for Luke's desire to tell 'the full truth', as if to set the record straight.

Application

The beginning of Luke's Gospel is a fascinating opening of a Gospel that has much to teach us. As we study the rest of it, we will not touch on the issues raised by the introduction again, and we will only return to it at the beginning and end of a study of Acts. Nevertheless, there is a great deal here that is attractive to a reader today. The fact that Luke uses method and enquiry, and searches for the truth, suggests that in a way, he was a man before his time, using the elements of historical method long before people thought about it in this way. Whatever the Gospel says later in, these words inspire us to be methodical and careful in our own study of the life of Jesus and its consequences. Perhaps if we do this, we will come as close to the heart of Jesus as Luke appears to get in the body of his work; and perhaps we will discover the power of the Holy Spirit in the spectacular way that Luke records, uniquely in his later writing (Acts 2).

Whoever the Gospel was written for, it was indeed written to persuade someone of the truth of the story of Jesus and His life, death and resurrection. We must therefore regard it as an evangelical tract, suitable for distribution to those who do not believe. Personally, I find it remarkable that people often use Mark for this purpose today, but rarely (in my experience) Luke! If this Gospel says that it has been written to help people believe (a distinction this Luke shares with John – see John 20:31), then surely we should use it in this way, both personally and evangelistically. The more we read of Luke's Gospel, the more we will realise the truth of this.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does the beginning of Luke's Gospel tell you about the Gospel itself and how it should be used?
2. Discuss in your group what you think about the theory that the Gospel was written to defend Paul at the court of the Emperor of Rome.
3. How important is it to be methodical in matters of faith and belief?

Topics covered by this text

- *The nature of the Gospel and evangelism*
- *The importance of the witness of Christ's life, death and resurrection*

Personal comments by author

Luke's Gospel is a remarkably distinct Gospel. It shares a great deal with Matthew and Luke, but it is highly individual. The fact that it was written by a Gentile is remarkable in itself, and it encourages me that God used people in pioneering ways right from the beginning of the life of the church. I am looking forward to exploring the rest of this Gospel to discover its truths and to learn more about Jesus, each study we do tells us more about Jesus, however many times we have read or studied before. This is the gift of the Gospels.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Check out whether the Gospel of Luke is used for evangelistic purposes either by your own church or others around you. If you find it is not, point out to those involved that potential of this Gospel.*

- *Pray about your own coming study of Luke's Gospel, and ask the Lord to show you how you can best benefit from this study using a 'methodology' such as writing down your thoughts.*
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Final Prayer

Glory be to You, O Lord, for You have sustained us throughout our lives and will continue to guide us into the future if we will stay walking in Your paths. Save us from the distractions of this world which draw us away from You, and stay close to us. We pray this in Jesus' name: AMEN
