

Luke 1:1-4

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[0 : 0 0] Tomorrow, wait for it, is December and Christmas looms large. It's the final countdown. I wonder if the prospect of Christmas fast approaching fills you with excitement or fills you with dread or perhaps a cocktail of both emotions. For Christians, Christmas is a time when we turn to the gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus. We do so for our own profit, for our own encouragement, and we do so also, I hope, in order that we might share the story with others. Christmas is a time to rediscover and announce the real meaning of Christmas and the reason for the season, and that would be two tired, corny expressions in just one sentence. But Christmas provides that opportunity. But the story that we read and the story that we tell, is it true? Is it true?

And this is the big question. You see, for many, that isn't an important question. There will be countless thousands who over this Christmas period will sing Christmas carols, will listen to the story, and will enjoy doing so. And for them, it is a matter indifferent if it is true or not. It's just nice. I think it was Dawkins himself who famously said that he quite enjoyed a carol service. Of course, gathering together, congregational, communal singing, a lovely story, what's not to like. It doesn't matter if it's true. But for Luke, as he begins his account of the life of Jesus, beginning with the birth narrative, it is crucially important if it is true or if it is not true. Did the events recorded by the gospel writers actually take place? Did they take place in the manner that they are described? And I want us to consider this question by focusing our attention on the manner in which one of the gospel writers, Luke introduces his account to the gospel story. And we've read his introduction two times already this morning there in verses 1 to 4 of Luke chapter 1. And having read these verses, the first thing that we can say is that Luke himself was clearly persuaded that his account was true, and he was insistent that it matters. Indeed, his principal purpose in writing is to persuade others that his account is true.

And what his preface also does is allow us to trace the story to source as we grapple with that question, is it true? And that's what we're going to do this morning. It's what we're going to attempt to do this morning. We're going to trace the story to source as we identify those presented to us in Luke's introduction as those who form part of what we might call a train of transmission. And we'll begin at the end of the transmission, the document before us, the product of this train of transmission, and then work backwards to source. Who are presented to us in this train of transmission that we're calling it, that will take us as we work backwards to the source of the story? Well, the characters, the personalities, the actors that we're going to be considering are working backwards, Theophilus, who's mentioned there in verse 4, Luke himself, who is writing the account. Then we'll take a step further backwards to the eyewitnesses that he makes reference to before taking a further step backward to the actual events that the eyewitnesses had witnessed and spoke about. Now, before we do that, before we look at each of these characters and trace the story back to source, before we do that, let's be clear about the message or the story that is being transmitted. The story concerns what Luke describes as the things. Notice there in verse 1, many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us. Somewhat intriguing. The things. What things? Well, another way of translating that word would be the events that have been fulfilled among us. What events is Luke referring to? Well, what Luke is referring to are the events that he goes on to record in the course of his gospel. The birth of

Jesus, the life of Jesus, the teaching of Jesus, the miracles of Jesus, the death of Jesus, his resurrection, his ascension, all of these things make up the account that he has produced. And these are the things that he declares as having been fulfilled among us. And this is the story that we're seeking to trace back to source.

It's interesting that even in the manner in which Luke writes this introduction, it's clear that he's writing the introduction having already produced the document. And the very tenses he employs makes it clear that what he's doing is, well, I've produced this document and now I'm going to introduce it and I'm going to explain that this document that I've already produced, this is its purpose. And that may seem the wrong way around to do the introduction at the end, but having spoken to lots of clever people who do PhDs, that's what they, the way they always seem to work. They do all their stuff and then the last thing they do is their introduction. I'm too simple a fellow to understand that, but that seems to be the approach. Well, certainly that seems to be what Luke has done. And so we can with confidence say that when he is speaking here at the beginning about the things, he's speaking about that which he has already written and that form the body of this account. All the events, the Jesus events, if you wish, all the events concerning the person of Jesus Christ. And what Luke is contending is that the things that he will record or that he has recorded and that make up his gospel account, these things are true.

[7 : 20] They really happened in the manner that they are recorded and described. So this is the story that we're going to look to trace, to source, the story concerning Jesus, the things, the events that are recorded about Jesus. Let's return then to our quest to trace the train of transmission backwards from the product, if you wish, the gospel account to its source. And we'll begin with Theophilus. Now, Theophilus, as is clear in the introduction, was the original recipient of the gospel. And what we want to do with Theophilus, and not just with Theophilus, but also with Luke and the eyewitnesses, is to briefly introduce him, to identify the role he played in transmitting the story, and highlight one aspect of belief or faith that is illustrated by him. Firstly, Theophilus will do the same with Luke, and the same with the eyewitnesses. So first of all, who is this man, Theophilus? Well, the truth of the matter is that we don't know who he is. We don't meet him ever again, other than when he is also mentioned in the second volume of Luke's account in the book of Acts, and there we meet him again. But other than that, we don't meet him again. So we don't know who he was. Some have even suggested that possibly Luke here had made up a suitable name. The name means lover of God. Seems a very suitable name for somebody that you would dedicate a gospel account to. And so Luke, as a literary technique, made up this name of this character, not in order to deceive anybody, but simply as a means of introducing his account. But that seems highly unlikely. It seems much more likely and indeed probable that Theophilus was an actual person. The way he's addressed the most excellent Theophilus suggests that he was a man of some prominence and importance known to Luke, and a man who, at the very least, had demonstrated a serious interest in the person of Jesus and the events that Luke relates in the gospel. And hence, his concern to have this account produced for him, or certainly Luke's concern to provide this account for Theophilus.

What about his role in the transmission of this story concerning Jesus? Well, we can certainly identify him as the reason in God's ordering of events for Luke writing his account, which though initially intended for Theophilus, became available for the church at large, indeed right down to the present day. That, at the very least, very obviously we can identify as his role in transmission. But I think we can say more about Theophilus and his role. It has been argued, it is argued, and I think cogently and persuasively, that Theophilus can also be viewed as a kind of patron who was to be responsible for the publication and copying and perhaps even distribution of the gospel account.

Now, given the manner in which such documents were produced and copied and distributed at the time, it was no small task to take that on. It would require, if you were to do it well, significant financial resources that you could imagine would be available to one described as the most excellent Theophilus. And so, if that is true, then Theophilus is not only a passive receiver of the truth, of the story, he's also an active and committed transmitter of the truth, of the story. And so, his role, if we think this is a reasonable presumption, is enhanced, I suppose you could say, or it seemed to be broader than we might initially imagine. But let's move on to consider Theophilus in this matter of his faith, his belief, and to highlight one aspect of his faith that is illustrated by this man, or of faith that is illustrated by this man. And the one aspect that I want to draw on and to just consider is the importance of certainty. Notice what Luke says as he addresses himself to Theophilus. There at the very end of this introduction, he's indicated what he's done, that he's put together this account, having investigated. And then in verse 4, we have this statement of purpose, so that you, that is Theophilus, may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. Now, it's clear that this was not a new story for Theophilus. Luke indicates that he had been taught already. The word that's employed there, the verb translated taught is a verb in Greek that we'll recognize because of its use in English, *katecheo*, that's where we get the word catechism from, and it's a verb that would be used generally of oral instruction. And so, Luke is clear that

Theophilus had been told the story, possibly by Luke himself or by another, but he'd heard the story concerning Jesus. He'd been taught, he'd been in some measure instructed, but Luke's concern is that he move on from having heard the story to come to a place of certainty concerning the story that he had heard. He was not yet certain. And for Luke, certainty is important. But as we think about this, notice that the word certainty can be understood in two related ways. And this can be seen, the two ways in which the word can be understood, can be seen by the use of two different prepositions to accompany the word.

And it's generally what you find in the translations, that this word certainty is introduced by one of two prepositions, either as we have it in our version here, the certainty, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught, or others choose to translate that expression so that you may know with certainty the things you have been taught. You can see how there's a slight difference there, the certainty or with certainty. Let's just think about these two possibilities that aren't mutually exclusive by any means. What about the certainty? Well, to introduce the word, or to qualify, if you wish, the word in that way, the certainty points to the truthfulness and historicity of the things recorded.

[14 : 23] The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, they really happened, so that you may know the certainty of the things. These things really happened, Theophilus. These aren't made-up stories.

They've not been enhanced. They've not been touched up to make them a bit more exciting. No, this is what really happened, Theophilus. I want you to know that these things are really true, the certainty of these things. The birth of Jesus, the life of Jesus, the death of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, they really happened. And given the proximity of Christmas, we focus on the birth narratives, Jesus really was born of a virgin. The angels really did appear and erupt in exultant praise, glory to God in the highest. The wise men really did see a star in the east that pointed them, that directed them in some way to the birth of the Messiah, the certainty. But then this word can also be understood in this slightly different nuanced way of with certainty, so that you may know with certainty concerning the things you have been taught. And that points more to the importance of Theophilus, and by extension you and me, being persuaded of the truthfulness and historicity of the account. Luke would have Theophilus, and indeed any reader, be certain. So it's not enough that these things be true. It's important that we be persuaded that they are true. Now, it's clearly connected, but they are distinct aspects of this reality. And what Luke is stressing is that when it comes to the big events and the saving work of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners, there is no merit in doubt. Luke assures us that the events recorded are certainly true, and we have reason to be certain that they are true. Now, it's perhaps easy to say that and to state that very categorically, but what about the reality of where you are, where many people are? Perhaps you have doubts, and it's good to be honest if you do have doubts concerning the truthfulness of the account, whether these things really happen. If you have doubts about it, well, there's no point in pretending you don't. If you do, well, you do. But what I would say is that it's not good to be passive in and with your doubts.

What should you do if you are not yet certain? Theophilus, it would seem, at the point of reception of the letter, was not yet certain. That's the whole point of being sent the account, that he would become certain. So, what do you do if you're not certain? Where do you go? Well, do what Theophilus was being encouraged to do, and we have reason did actually do. Turn to the gospel accounts and read them with an open mind and a humble spirit. Luke wrote his gospel for you, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught, or the things that you've heard, the things that others speak about, that you may know the certainty of these things. So, that's Theophilus. Now, we want to follow the thread back one step further to Luke, and we'll do the same thing with Luke as we did with Theophilus. Who was he? What was his role in transmission? And then focusing on one aspect of faith that is illustrated by Luke. First of all, who was Luke? And we won't detain ourselves here.

Suffice it to say that he was a Greek convert to Christianity who's described by Paul as the beloved physician, giving us an indication, more than an indication, telling us his profession. He was clearly, and Paul makes this clear in comments that he makes concerning Luke, he was greatly loved and highly valued by the apostle as a committed and loyal fellow gospel worker. This is Luke.

And what role did Luke play in the transmission of the story? Well, we can identify his role as that of author of the gospel account directed to Theophilus. Again, it's very obvious. This is his role. He writes the gospel account. But that role as author can, in the light of what Luke himself says in the introduction, be further described. Luke was a historian. He was an investigator. He was an apologist. He was a careful compiler and communicator of the matter under investigation. He was a skillful writer who sets out. He was a writer who sets out his information before his readers, as he himself says, in an orderly or logical fashion. That was his role. But what about his faith? What aspect of faith is illustrated by Luke in his involvement in this process of transmission? And let me suggest that this is the one aspect that we can highlight. No doubt there are others, but the one that we wish to highlight, and it is this, the importance of personal discovery. With Theophilus, we're presented with, we're confronted with the importance of certainty. With Luke, we are confronted with the importance of personal discovery. Now, what do I mean by this? Well, Luke himself, in these verses, acknowledges that many had already drawn up an account of the events surrounding the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That's what he tells us at the very beginning in verse 1. Many have undertaken to draw an account. Now, Luke could have contented himself with their accounts. Luke could have listened and pondered on what others thought and what others said on the stories that others told.

[20 : 24] He could have been intrigued or even moved by the testimonies of others. He could have passively given or withheld his assent to the accounts drawn up by others. He could have done all of these things, but that was not enough for Luke. Luke was intent on personal discovery. The matters in question were of such importance, the implications so fundamental that Luke had to discover for himself who this Jesus was. He wasn't an eyewitness. He hadn't followed him. He had to discover for himself who this Jesus was and whether all that he was hearing about Jesus was true or false.

And even having discovered for himself Jesus as his own Lord and Savior, he was intent on discovering more and investigating further about the man Jesus. And this is what he does. And we, thank God, have the product of his investigation, of his personal discovery into the things, the events, the Jesus events. Here we have it in his gospel. The importance of personal discovery. What about you? Are you content to rely on what others say concerning Jesus? Are you a passive listener to the testimonies and stories of others? Do you simply presume that what is said is true or false? Or have you discovered for yourself the reality and the meaning of the things, the events concerning Jesus? Personal discovery was important for Luke, and having discovered

Jesus for himself, it remained important to him that others make a similar discovery. This is the very purpose of his gospel directed to one man for whom Luke wishes no greater discovery, no greater experience than discovering Jesus for himself. This is no doubt the prayer that accompanied the investigation and the composing of this gospel as he provided it to Theophilus, that Theophilus would discover for himself, as Luke had discovered for himself, who Jesus was. Let's continue following the thread backwards from Theophilus to Luke, as we follow the thread or the train of transmission back one step further to the eyewitnesses, who are also made mentioned of the three of the three of the three of the three of the three of the three of the in actual fact, Luke identifies what might be two distinct groups, or they may not be two distinct groups, but they could be understood as two distinct groups involved in the train of transmission.

He begins by speaking of many who have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled. So you could understand those as one group, those who had undertaken to draw up an account, be that a verbal or a written account.

But then he also makes specific reference to eyewitnesses. In verse 2, he speaks of those who were eyewitnesses, implicitly and obviously of the events that are being described that make up this story.

[24 : 00] Now, I'm not suggesting that they are two distinct groups. There could be overlap, but equally there could be those who were drawing up accounts who weren't eyewitnesses. Luke himself was about to draw up or has drawn up an account. He wasn't an eyewitness.

So in that sense, you can distinguish them, even though we don't necessarily have to separate them in a very clinical way. But it would seem, given the manner in which he speaks of the eyewitnesses and how he goes on to describe them, really as one group, as both eyewitnesses and servants of the Word.

Notice that expression he uses there in verse 2. Just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word.

And I don't think Luke here is suggesting that there are two groups there, eyewitnesses and servants of the Word. No, the same people were both eyewitnesses and servants of the Word. And given that, given that language that Luke uses, it would suggest that Luke perhaps has principally in mind the apostle when he speaks of eyewitnesses and servants of the Word.

I'm not saying that he has the apostles exclusively in mind. He may well be including others who were eyewitnesses to the Jesus events, family members of Jesus, other disciples. I'm sure in his travels accompanying Paul, he would have taken every opportunity to speak to any eyewitness.

[25 : 24] I can almost imagine the excitement of Luke when he meets somebody who was an eyewitness of the events. And immediately Luke would say, well, tell me about this miracle. You say, I've got one or two accounts, but what did you see? What happened?

Any eyewitness would have been collared by Luke in order for him to gather all the data, all the material that he needed to produce a trustworthy and accurate account.

But principally here, these eyewitnesses and servants of the Word would seem to be pointing to the apostles who would have served as his principal eyewitnesses.

What about their role in transmission, the role of these eyewitnesses? Well, we're told that they were both eyewitnesses and servants of the Word.

But firstly, they were eyewitnesses. Now, for a careful historian like Luke, this was crucial. These men and women had seen for themselves the events in question.

[26 : 24] For the birth narratives, I imagine that Luke would have sought to interview and speak with those who were witnesses of the events.

That would have been more difficult than for subsequent stages in the life of Jesus. Perhaps he even interviewed Mary or others who were eyewitnesses to the events.

And similarly, for all the other events recorded in the Gospel, these were people who could say to Luke, I saw Jesus with my very own eyes. I saw him do that.

I saw him following his resurrection. I saw him. I was there. I saw him. As I was thinking of this, and this will date me, and the reference will just be lost on many of you who are younger.

But I remember, oh, years ago, and I just Googled his name just to see if he was still around. And he is. He still does tours. But the older folk among you, and in my generation, will remember Max Boyce, you know, the Welsh comedian whose comedy revolved around the Wales rugby team.

[27 : 26] And his famous line was, And I know because I was there. I know because I was there. Well, Luke was concerned with people who could say that about the Jesus events.

I know because I was there. This was their role in transmission. They were eyewitnesses. Now, also significant in this matter of establishing the truth of his account is that by appealing to witnesses, eyewitnesses as he does, Luke leaves himself open to challenge.

And he's not concerned about that. He's perfectly content to be open to challenge. You see, skeptics or opponents could call him to task. They could say, Well, Luke, here's this account that you've given us.

And you claim that it's on the basis of eyewitnesses. Well, who are they? Who are these eyewitnesses? You've got to remember that this was written very soon after the events ascribed.

Most scholars would suggest in the decade of the 60s following the birth of Christ. So the eyewitnesses that Luke was claiming that he had garnered and drawn his testimonies from would still have been alive, many of them.

[28 : 33] And so if he was making it up, then it would be simple enough for people to challenge his testimony, to go to the eyewitnesses and say, Did you really say that to Luke? Did you see it?

See if there was contradiction. See if there wasn't a credibility to the sources that Luke was claiming for his account. And so the eyewitnesses are crucial in this process of transmission.

But let's also just notice what we might call their faith. And in thinking of their faith, we're really moving on to the second part of how they're described.

They were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word. And when we think of their faith and we think of one aspect of faith that we want to highlight or illustrate, it is this, the importance of personal transformation.

Remember with Theophilus, we drew out the importance of certainty. With Luke, we drew out the importance of personal discovery. Well, with the eyewitnesses, we can draw out the importance of personal transformation.

[29 : 37] And I draw this out from the fact that they are described not just as eyewitnesses, but also as servants of the Word. Now, there would have been those, I'm sure, who were only eyewitnesses, who weren't also servants of the Word.

I could imagine, and I'm just speculating, but I could imagine some neighbor of Lazarus in Bethany. And Luke could have knocked on his door and he said, Now, you're a neighbor of Lazarus.

Now, I've been told that Jesus rose Lazarus from the dead. And I'm investigating this. What have you got to say? And that neighbor could have said, Well, you know, it's funny you should say that, because I was there.

We were there. We were among the mourners. And it was amazing. You know, this Lazarus, he died. He was in the tomb. And this Jesus guy came and he rose him from the grave. It was amazing. He was an eyewitness, but his life carried on.

No change, no transformation. He was an eyewitness, but no more than an eyewitness. But these eyewitnesses are described in a different way. They were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word.

[30 : 42] And what does that imply? Well, it implies that this discovery, these events that they witnessed, led to their transformation. Indeed, we can think a little bit about this by exploring just a little bit this expression, servants of the Word, and what does it mean?

And actually, this expression can also be understood in one of two ways. And possibly, we can't really state categorically, but possibly Luke has both in mind.

First of all, the expression servants of the Word could be understood, as I think we would generally understand it, as a reference to the fact that these men and women, as well as witnessing the Jesus events, were themselves persuaded as to his identity.

And they were dedicated themselves to communicating the Word in the sense of the message of the Gospel. So they are servants of the Word, and that's to be understood as servants of the message.

They had a message. They discovered who Jesus was. They believed the message, and they were now communicating the message, be it as apostles or be it in a less formal way as believers, servants of the Word in that sense.

[31 : 56] But this expression can also be understood in another way, and that would be to, I suppose, understand that the expression or the language of the Word in the way that it is understood when it appears in John's Gospel.

The word here is the word logos. What they're being described as is servants of the logos, servants of the Word. Now, we know that in John's Gospel, when the word logos appears in the first chapter, it's translated with a capital letter, and their translators are interpreting.

They're saying, well, clearly this is a reference to Jesus as the Word, and so they capitalize the Word. Now, it's exactly the same word here, but translators choose to use a lowercase because they think, well, possibly this isn't a reference to Jesus, it's a reference to the message.

But there's no definitive reason why we couldn't understand this expression, servants of the Word, as being servants of the logos, servants of the Word made flesh, servants of the Messiah, servants of Jesus.

And if that is what Luke intends, and I'm not stating categorically that it is, then again, it introduces, and perhaps even more dramatically, this aspect of transformation. Not only were these men witnesses of the events, but they were transformed by what they saw, and the one they saw, and they were transformed into servants of Jesus, servants of the logos.

[33 : 29] What they heard and saw was transformative. Their very identity was now determined by their relationship to Jesus. They were His servants, His disciples. They had left all and followed Him.

Well, however we understand this expression, servants of the Word in the sense of the message of the gospel, or servants of the Word, as in the logos, the reality really isn't that different.

These were men who had been transformed by their encounter with Jesus. Their faith was not an extracurricular activity, but the very core and essence of their identity.

And purpose, the importance of personal transformation is illustrated by these eyewitnesses. Well, what about you? What about you?

It's not enough to be an eyewitness in the sense of as you, clearly not in the sense of these eyewitnesses, but in the sense in which you read the gospel, and you're persuaded that these events are true.

[34 : 28] And you say, well, yes, I'm persuaded that this did actually happen. That's important, but that's not enough. That discovery is to lead to the transformation that was the case with these eyewitnesses who became servants of the Word.

But now we follow the thread back to really the source, or almost the source. Certainly one step further back to the thing. Remember in verse 1, Luke has said that many had undertaken to draw an account of the things.

These things or events were identified as all the events that have to do with Jesus. Now does the thread stop here with the actual events?

The events witnessed by the eyewitnesses, communicated to Luke, transmitted in written form for Theophilus, published and distributed by Theophilus for us, are the events the end of the line?

Well, I would suggest that not quite. You see, in this first verse, Luke employs one key word that allows us to trace matters one further step back to source.

[35 : 41] Because notice what he says there in verse 1. Many have undertaken to draw an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us. I'm going to focus on that word that Luke uses.

The things, the events that have been fulfilled among us. The word is sometimes translated accomplished, but certainly what it does is that it injects into the events a sense of purpose.

These events were not random events. These events were not events that were born in the mind of the carpenter from Galilee. These events fulfilled prophecies delivered by God through His servants in the Old Testament.

Indeed, going back to the very account of the fall as we did a few moments ago, from even that moment, there is this prophetic announcement of these events.

Not in all the details, but pointing towards these events. And so these events, these things, were in fulfillment of. So the story doesn't begin with the events.

[36 : 51] We have to trace it back further to the fact that they had been prophesied prior to their occurrence. These events fulfilled or brought to fruition an already established purpose, namely God's purpose of redemption, of salvation for His people and His world.

You see, God is the source of all the things or events recorded by Luke. It is in the gracious purposes of God that we find the origin of the gospel story.

This is where it all begins. God is both the author and in His Son, the actor in the drama of redemption. In the story that Luke records for us and declares with confidence, it's true, it's certainly true.

It is God who purposed to save a people for Himself. It is God who sent His own Son into the world to save such a people. It is God who by His Spirit transformed the lives of the eyewitnesses.

It is God who called Luke to carefully investigate and put in order these things. It is God who desired that Theophilus would know with certainty the truth of the matter.

[38 : 12] And it is God who would have you know the certainty of the things you have been taught. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for this great story, the story of Jesus.

And we thank You especially that it is true. We thank You that as we turn to read Luke's account and as we discover who Jesus is and all that He did and all that happened to Him, all the events of His life and indeed of His death and resurrection, and we are able to declare with Luke, these things are certainly true.

We pray that we would indeed enjoy that certainty and that if we as yet do not enjoy that certainty, that You would bring us to that place of certainty, that we would turn to read with an open mind and looking to You for direction, that we would discover for ourselves if indeed these things are true.

And that as we do discover them to be true, so they would have the impact on us that they had on these first eyewitnesses who became servants of the Word, those who announced the message, those who served the living Word, Jesus, who bowed before Him and dedicated their lives to Him, that that would be true of us also.

And we pray that You would also help us as we communicate this message, that we would do so with that confidence in its veracity, in its historicity, in its truthfulness, and that You would help us to so persuade others to come to similar conclusions.

[39 : 47] And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.