

“An Orderly Account” (Luke 1:1–25)

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Is anyone here into history? Do you read biographies and watch documentaries? If you do, you probably want to make sure that the author or documentarian knows what he or she is talking about. You want to make sure that this person has studied the relevant data and interviewed key sources. That’s one of the reasons I like reading. I like to see what resources the author used. So, I read every footnote or endnote, just to check that author’s work. The historian who uses early, reliable sources is more trustworthy than the one who uses late, legendary sources.

If you’re a history buff, you will know that historians frame their stories of the past in certain ways. Every historian is trying to achieve something by telling a story. There is no such thing as an objective, unbiased history. Every historian chooses a subject, and he or she also chooses which facts to include and which to exclude. And every historian presents their history in different ways. Some present their stories in strict chronological order. Some of those historians may begin with a lot of background information. So, a biographer might write about a person’s life by first writing about that person’s parents. Or, an historian might begin right in the thick of an event, and then later incorporate background information. So, a documentary on D-Day might begin with Allied Forces storming the beaches of Normandy, and then later recount the events that led to that crusade. How an historian frames his or her history matters.

Today, we’re going to begin studying a book of history, the Gospel of Luke. This is a story primarily about Jesus. Like any history, this story is intended to achieve some purpose. The word “gospel” literally means “good news.” This lets us know that this story isn’t just an interesting read about some trivial events. No, this is history that is meant to be good news for us, if we allow it to shape our lives.

We’re going to study the book of Luke for a few reasons. One, Christianity is quite obviously centered on Jesus Christ. We need to keep coming back to the stories about Jesus to be reminded of who he is, what he taught, and what he has accomplished for us. And we can’t just pick and choose the stories of Jesus that we like. We need to look at Gospels in their entirety. We’re a church committed to the Bible because we believe it is the written Word of God. Therefore, we often go through entire books of the Bible.

Two, we're looking at Luke and not Matthew, Mark, and Luke because its opening chapters tell the story of Jesus' birth, and that's fitting as we approach Christmas.

Three, we're looking at Luke because in 2016, I preached through the book of Acts. Acts is a sequel to Luke. Yes, I'm taking things out of order. So, think of Luke as a prequel to Acts, and we'll be just fine.

Four, I'm preaching through Luke because it contains some hard teachings of Jesus. It would be easy to avoid these teachings. But if we did that, we would be creating a Jesus of our own desires and not looking at the Jesus of history. If we want to be Christians with integrity, we can't do that.

So, we're going to study Luke's Gospel. Since we'll spend a good amount of time in this book, I want to give us some background information. We know that this Gospel was written by a man named Luke because the earliest manuscript that we have of Luke (P⁷⁵) says, "according to Luke." Many early Christians also attributed this Gospel to Luke.¹ In fact, there was no doubt that Luke wrote this book until the middle of the nineteenth century, when biblical scholars became increasingly skeptical of the Bible's authority. Their skepticism isn't supported by the evidence, however. I think their skepticism is simply due to their lack of faith. Some people don't want the Bible to be historically reliable and true because they don't want the God of the Bible to be Lord over their lives.

So, who is Luke? According to the letters of the apostle Paul, one of Jesus' early messengers, Luke was one of his faithful coworkers (2 Tim. 4:11) and a doctor (Col. 4:14). He may have been a Gentile or a Greek Jew. He may have been from Antioch, which is in Syria, north of Palestine, where the action in Luke's Gospel takes place. That means he didn't witness the events of Jesus' life. But he seems to have been a sometime traveling companion to Paul on his missionary journeys, so he knew Paul. (In Acts, there are several "we" passages that indicate that the author was among Paul's companions. See Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–8, 13–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16). As we'll see, he claimed to have interviewed eyewitnesses, so I'm sure he met other apostles, such as Peter and possibly James.

¹ For a list of reasons why we can trust that Luke is the author of this Gospel, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 258–261.

That's enough background. Let's start reading. We'll begin by reading the first four verses of Luke.

¹ Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.²

Luke begins by noting that others have compiled narratives about the things that God accomplished. These events were relayed to Luke and people like him by “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word.” There were many people who witnessed the events of Jesus’ life. There were the twelve disciples, of course. Two of them, Matthew and John, wrote Gospels, and Peter wrote two letters that are in the Bible. But others besides the disciples witnessed events like Jesus’ birth, his life, his teaching and preaching, his miracles, his death, and his life after he was resurrected from the grave. Some of these eyewitnesses were also “ministers of the word,” that is, they preached the message about Jesus, and they passed on such details to people like Luke, who we might call a second-generation Christian.

Luke says that he thought it would be good to write his own “orderly account” of these events, since he followed them closely for some time. He writes this book, and his sequel, the book of Acts, to someone named Theophilus. We don’t know who this is. He seems to be a person of some standing, perhaps a rich person who was a patron of Luke. We don’t know. But his name means “friend of God” or “lover of God,” and Luke writes to him so that he “may have certainty concerning the things [he has] been taught.” Luke wants Theophilus, and all the readers of this book, to know for certain the truth about what God has done through Jesus.

I’ve given a bit of background information at the beginning because I want us to see the claim that Luke is making. He says he is writing a careful account of the things he has learned from eyewitnesses. We should take that claim seriously. The New Testament documents were written by eyewitnesses or people who knew eyewitnesses. They are meant to be taken as historical documents. If the author of this book says that he interviewed eyewitnesses and wrote his history based on what they said, then we should take him at his word unless we have compelling reasons to believe otherwise.

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

That means that unless we have evidence to the contrary, we should accept the historicity of this book. We should accept that this book was written within a few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, when eyewitnesses were still alive. There's a good reason to think that Luke completed Acts shortly after the year 62, which is when Paul was released from prison in Rome. He must have written his Gospel right before writing Acts. And Luke probably did much of his research while he accompanied Paul on his journeys. Paul, Luke, and others traveled to Jerusalem, where Paul was arrested. He was transferred to Caesarea Philippi, a city further north. Paul was there for two years, probably between the years 57 and 59, and during that time Luke surely was able to gather sources for this book. It seems that he used the Gospel of Mark as one source, but about 40 percent of Luke is unique and not shared with the other Gospels. This material might have come from other eyewitnesses, possibly people like Mary.

The point is that Luke claims to have written a book of history based on eyewitness testimony. From what we know of Luke and Acts, Luke was a careful historian. He places the events of these books within the broader history of the Roman Empire, and the details he recounts are accurate.

There's a lot more that can be said about the historical trustworthiness of this book and the whole New Testament. If you want to know more, you can read that insert in the bulletin, "How We Can Know Jesus?" or listen to a sermon I gave three years ago by that same name.³ But I want to highlight how important it is to know that the events in this book actually happened in the past. This is not a legend or a myth or some kind of fairy tale designed to make us feel good. Many skeptics believe this Gospel was written later in time. If someone fabricated it, why would they choose Luke as the author? Luke is relatively unknown. He wasn't an apostle. If you were going to make up a Gospel, you'd name it after Peter or Judas or Mary. That's what we see in false Gospels written late in the second century. No, this book is earth-shattering reality. It's good news. If it weren't real, it wouldn't be good news at all. Entertainment, perhaps, but not good news.

Now, how does Luke begin his story? Does he start with Jesus? Actually, he starts with some lesser-known individuals. He begins with the story of a priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. Let's read verses 5–7:

³ That sermon and others can be found at <https://wbcommunity.org/jesus>. It can also be found at <https://wbcommunity.org/how-can-we-know-jesus>.

⁵ In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Luke tells us this story begins during the time when Herod the Great was king of Judea. He reigned from 37–4 B.C. And during the latter part of that time, there was a priest named Zechariah. There were perhaps as many as 18,000 priests in Israel at that time, so Zechariah was just one of many. His wife, Elizabeth, was related to Aaron, the first high priest. Notice that there are already a couple of Old Testament names given to us: Abijah and Aaron. There are many references and allusions to the Old Testament at the beginning of Luke. This reminds us that this is part of the continuing story we find in the whole Bible, which is a story of how God relates to people.

We're told that both Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous. They obeyed God's commands. We're also told that they were incapable of having children, because they were old and Elizabeth was infertile.

Now, before we move on with the story, we have to see that this couple was obedient to God. The reason they didn't have children wasn't because they were being punished by God. Why then is anyone barren? And I don't just mean incapable of having children. Why is life like this at times? Why are we frustrated. We do things not go the way we hoped they would go?

To understand, we have to know something of the whole story of the Bible. I only have time this morning to paint that story in the broadest strokes. But the story begins with God. He is perfect in every way, the greatest being who has ever existed. He is complete in himself. He had no need to create the universe or this planet or people, but he chose to for his own purposes. He made us to have a special relationship with him. He made us to be like him, to reflect what he's like, to represent him, to worship, love, and obey him. But from the beginning, human beings have ignored God, turned away from him, rebelled against him, disobeyed him, and failed to love him. When that first happened, something we call "sin" entered into the world. Sin isn't just a wrong action. It's a power, an evil force that takes up residence within us. It distorts our desires, so we don't love the things that are good for us and, instead, we love the things that are harmful. We are selfish and proud. We covet and are greedy. We fight.

Since God is perfect and pure, he cannot allow dwell with sin and sinful people, and he cannot allow sin to destroy his creation. As a partial punishment for sin, he cursed his creation. This does not mean that things are as bad as they could be. But things aren't perfect. The world that was a paradise was lost. In its place, there is a world that has natural disasters, diseases, and death. And, worst of all, there is a separation between God and human beings. We don't see God. We don't always sense his presence.

So, the reason that things are barren is because of sin. But God is not only a holy God who judges and punishes sin. He is also a good God. Actually, the Bible says that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). And because God is loving and merciful and gracious, he had a plan to save people from sin and the condemnation that comes with sin. It's a long story, but it began with an old man named Abraham and his wife, Sarah. (At first, they're called Abram and Sarai.) They, too, were unable to have children because they were old and because Sarah was barren (Gen. 11:30). Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, Abraham was obedient to God, keeping his commandments, statutes, and laws (Gen. 26:5).

God told Abraham that he would bless the whole earth through Abraham and his offspring, that his offspring would be a multitude of people, and that kings and nations would come from him (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:4–6; 17:5–6; 22:17–18). In other words, God would reverse the curse of sin through Abraham and his offspring, and that his descendants would populate the earth. When you stop and think about that, it sounds too good to be true. But if you're Abraham, it sounds impossible. He's an old man with an old wife who couldn't have children when she was younger. And now he's supposed to have children? This sounds like a bad joke. But Abraham has Isaac, and Isaac has Jacob, and Jacob has twelve sons who become the twelve tribes of Israel.

And Israel became a nation. God brought them out of slavery in Egypt. He performed miracles in their presence and gave them his law. He led them into their own land, where they settled and became a kingdom. Yet the Israelites still had the power of sin in them. They often disobeyed God and they started to worship other, false gods. Because of their disobedience and idol worship, God punished them through their enemies. God led the superpowers of their day, Assyria and Babylon, to attack Israel and bring people into exile. Jerusalem, the capital city, was destroyed, as was the temple.

Later, the people came back from exile in Babylon and settled back in the land of Judah. They built a new (and less glorious) temple and rebuilt the city. But they were still slaves (Ezra 9:9; Neh. 9:36). They were under the power of foreign kingdoms (ranging from Persia to Greece to the Roman Empire) and they were slaves to the power of sin. Even during the reign of Herod the Great, they were under the power of the Roman Empire. They were waiting for a promised Messiah, an anointed King, a descendant of Abraham and King David, who would defeat their enemies and usher in a reign of peace, justice, and righteousness that would last forever (Isa. 9:6–7; 11”1–16). In other words, the people were waiting for another exodus, for deliverance from exile.

Now, before we go in with the story, I understand that some of what I’ve said may sound very foreign. It may sound like something very distant and ancient. But wouldn’t you agree that we live in a world that seems cursed? No, it’s not all bad. But we have natural disasters, diseases, wars, fighting, and death. We have the internal curses of loneliness, depression, anxiety, and confusion. Don’t we all want deliverance from something? And what is able to deliver us? Do you think it’s the government? Your family and friends? Your job? Your money? Someone else’s money? People have tried all the things of the world and they haven’t worked. We’re waiting for deliverance that only someone from outside this world can give us.

That’s what the Jews were waiting for. They were waiting for God to act. They wanted him to get rid of the occupying forces of the Roman Empire. But what they really needed was a Savior.

Now, let’s get back to the story of Zechariah and his wife. Let’s read verses 8–17:

⁸ Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

Zechariah belonged to one of twenty-four divisions of priests. Each division served at the temple for one week, twice a year. The temple was the place where God's special presence was believed to dwell. It was where the people worshiped God, where they offered up sacrifices for sin and prayers. Sacrifices and offerings were presented twice a day at the temple. This included incense, which represented the prayers of the people (Ps. 141:2; Rev. 5:8; 8:3–4). Priests were the Israelites who mediated between God and other Israelites. They were the ones who made the sacrifices and presented the offerings. Priests were chosen to enter the temple by lot, which was sort of like flipping a coin or rolling dice. And it so happened that Zechariah was chosen to burn incense inside the Holy Place of the temple. This was a great honor and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

When Zechariah was in the temple, he saw something unusual: the angel Gabriel. Angels are servants of God and they are usually unseen. The Bible actually doesn't make as much of angels as some people might imagine. It's rare that they appear to someone. So, when this happens, you know something special is about to take place.

When Zechariah sees Gabriel, he is afraid. This is what happens when people see angels. They're not cuddly little cherubs. But Gabriel tells John not to fear. Gabriel tells him that he has good news. God has heard Zechariah's prayer. We don't know what prayer he's referring to, but it was probably a prayer in the past for a child. Gabriel says, against all odds, that Elizabeth will have a son who will be named John. John, or Ἰωάννης in Greek, is related to a Hebrew name that means "God is gracious." God will graciously give this elderly couple a child. This child will bring joy and gladness not only to Zechariah and Elizabeth, but also to many, because he will be "great before the Lord." This means that he will be great in God's eyes, but it also hints at John's role: he will be the forerunner of his cousin, Jesus. He will announce the Lord's coming.

John will take a special vow. He won't drink "wine or strong drink" because he is specially consecrated to God. Drinking wine and strong drink in the Bible is not inherently wrong.⁴ But the Bible does condemn drunkenness (Prov. 20:1; 23:20–21, 29–32; Eccl. 10:17; Eph. 5:18). At any rate, John lived an ascetic lifestyle, refusing all comforts. His calling was

⁴ Psalm 104:15 says that God gives "wine to gladden the heart of man." According to Deuteronomy 14, Israelites could consume the "tithes of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil" that they brought to Jerusalem when they worshiped there (verse 23). Or, they could bring money instead and "spend the money for whatever you desire—oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves" (verse 26).

unique.⁵ He seems to be the only one in the Bible who was filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb. The God of the Bible is unique, for he is one Being in three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When people have a relationship with the Son, Jesus, the Holy Spirit changes them and he lives inside of them. But John was filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment he existed. This shows that God's hand was upon him in a special way.

John would perform a very special task. He would turn the hearts of Israelites back to God. He would do this the way the prophet Elijah had done hundreds of years earlier, when he also called people to turn away from sin and idolatry and back to God. One of the Old Testament prophets, Malachi, said that Elijah would return "to turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers" (Mal. 4:6). There, the idea seems to be that as people turn toward God, they start to be reconciled to each other. Peace with God leads to peace with others.⁶ It seems that John fulfills the role of Elijah, but in Luke it says that he will "turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just." There's no mention of the children turning to the fathers. Rather, the fathers, the older generation, have been disobedient and need to turn to the younger generation. This points to John's role: he calls people to get ready for something new, when Jesus, the Messiah, comes. John tells the people to be prepared.

Let's finish reading today's passage to see what happens next. I'll read verses 18–25.

¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." ²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²² And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. ²³ And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴ After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, ²⁵ "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

⁵ Samson and Samuel, two other "miracle babies," had similar vows (Judg. 13:4–5; 1 Sam. 1:11).

⁶ There also may be a hint that the Israelites would return to the ways of the Patriarchs, like Abraham. Isaiah 63:16 says, "Abraham does not know us," because of their sin. When the Israelites return to God, they return to the faith of their fathers.

Zechariah seems to have some doubt. He wonders how he and his wife could possibly have a child. Because of his doubt, he is made mute. It also seems that he might have been deaf, as we'll see in a couple of weeks (Luke 1:62). This might have given John some proof that Gabriel's news would come true. It was also a mild punishment for Zechariah's doubt. God expects people to trust him, even if his message seems impossible. The reason is that God is trustworthy, and he has a habit of doing the impossible.

Sure enough, John goes home to his wife and Elizabeth conceives. For some reason, she hides herself for months. It's not clear why. Perhaps she did this as a way of consecrating herself to God's service. It's not clear, but it parallels the way her relative, Mary, remained hidden from her hometown for the early months of her pregnancy.

Now that we've gone through this passage, we should ask ourselves what it means for us. There are two main things I want us to get out of this morning's passage. The first is that Luke says he wrote an historical account based on eyewitness testimony. These events really happened. A number of people simply can't believe that a story containing supernatural elements, like angels and miracles, can be true. I understand why some people might doubt. I have never seen an angel or a miracle. But other people have. At any rate, I think we should ask ourselves this question: If nothing in the natural world can fix this broken world, shouldn't we hope for supernatural help? If God exists, shouldn't we expect a story about God's acts in history to contain supernatural elements? I think the Bible would be rather odd without those elements. Should we expect God, who made the universe out of nothing, to give us a story about a man praying for money and then finding spare change under the couch cushions? Much more could be said about the reality of the existence of God and things like miracles. If you have doubts, I would ask you to suspend your disbelief and continue to learn more about Jesus by coming back next week.

The other thing I want us to see is that God brings life out of nothing, hope out of despair, fullness and joy out of barrenness. He causes people to turn to one another and be reconciled. And he does this through Jesus. In the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth, they couldn't have children. They were literally barren. In the case of Israel, they had often been spiritually barren. The same is true of us. God doesn't promise to give us children or wonderful relationships or health and wealth in this life. But he does bring spiritual life out of spiritual death. And, though we aren't there yet, the end of the grand story of the universe is that God will one day recreate

the world to be a paradise, where there is no more barrenness of any kind. There will be more diseases, no more natural disasters, no more fighting and wars, no more sin, and no more death. It will only be God and the people he has prepared for himself.

How does God bring fullness out of barrenness? How can he do that? He does that because Jesus, the eternal Son of God who was full of glory, became barren by becoming a man. He lived a perfect life of righteousness, always loving and obeying God the Father. And yet he died in our place when he was crucified. His death pays for all the sin of those who turn to him in faith. Jesus turns people to God, and when people truly turn to God, they are transformed. Lives are changed, relationships are healed. This doesn't mean life is easy or that Christians are perfect. But it means that Christians have hope.

Come back to learn more about Jesus next week. For now, let's pray.