

HIS MISSION

JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Contributions by

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HIS MISSION

**JESUS IN
THE GOSPEL
OF LUKE**

**D. A. CARSON AND
KATHLEEN B. NIELSON, EDITORS**

 **CROSSWAY**
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PREFACE

The plenary sessions of the national conferences of The Gospel Coalition are always devoted to the exposition of Scripture. At the conference in April 2013, we focused on the Gospel according to Luke. A text that long and that rich cannot be given detailed treatment in eight expositions, but we decided that, instead of choosing a handful of contiguous chapters, we would in some degree cover the whole book. The slightly revised and printed manuscripts of those eight addresses constitute the eight chapters of this book. Each chapter stands alone, yet because we were all working on one biblical book, it is gratifying to see how well the individual chapters cohere and build on one another to provide a “feel” for this wonderful Gospel.

The appendix is a virtually verbatim report of a panel session that occupied another plenary hour. That panel was devoted to answering the question, “Did Jesus preach the gospel?” To those who are unaware of current debates, the question may seem a bit superfluous, almost insulting. Yet in recent years, very different answers have been given to that question. Some say, “No, Jesus didn’t preach the gospel—he preached the kingdom, or the gospel of the kingdom.” There may be a whisper of truth to this formulation, but it rapidly degenerates into a rather pathetic competition between the Synoptic Gospels and the letters of Paul. Others insist, “Jesus does *not* preach the gospel; he *is* the gospel.” Once again, there is some truth in the formulation, for certainly Jesus did preach him-

self. But such a strong antithesis—he does *not* preach the gospel, he *is* the gospel—causes one to wonder exactly what the burden of Jesus’s preaching ministry was, and why the first four books of the New Testament are called “Gospels.” For others, the question is a trifle misleading: they argue that to grasp aright Jesus’s significance, one not only must listen to what he preaches and teaches, but also observe what he does and what happens to him, including the cross and resurrection. Yet other answers are frequently advanced. So the question we posed became for our panel a trigger that prompted deeper reflection and better understanding of what we mean by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Besides, the panelists obviously enjoyed talking with one another, and their joy communicated itself to the audience, as it will communicate itself to readers.

I cannot adequately thank the plenary speakers for providing full manuscripts of their expositions. Thanks go to Daniel Ahn for the transcription of the panel discussion, to Kathleen Nielson for her thoughtful editing, and to Crossway for its commitment to this series. It is always a joy and a privilege to serve with people so transparently devoted to the Lord Jesus.

Soli Deo gloria.

Don Carson
President, TGC

JESUS THE SON OF GOD, THE SON OF MARY

Luke 1-2

John Piper

Only in one place in the Gospel of Luke does the author speak in the first person, referring to himself. He does this three times in the first four verses of the book:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among *us*, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to *us*, 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, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

Never again does Luke refer to himself as “me” or “us” in this Gospel. And the reason he does it here is plain: he wants to come right out and be crystal clear about why he is writing this book. He is writing this account, he says, “that you [Theophilus, or John Piper, or add your name] may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (v. 4).

To Have Certainty

My focus in this chapter is on the first two chapters of the Gospel. We are not left wondering why Luke wrote these chapters. His purpose (that Theophilus will have certainty concerning the things he had been taught) is so explicit and so prominent at the beginning of the Gospel that I want to linger over it for a moment to clarify where this chapter is going.

Behind the translation “that you may have certainty” is the idea of knowing the “security,” “safety,” or “stability” of what you’ve been taught. The Greek word Luke uses, *asphaleian* (here translated as “certainty”), is used in two other places in the New Testament. One is Acts 5:23 (AT): “We found the prison locked in all security [*asphaleia*]”—usually translated “securely locked.” The other is 1 Thessalonians 5:3: “While people are saying, ‘There is peace and security [*asphaleian*],’ then sudden destruction will come upon them.” The same word is used nineteen times in the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament), where it almost always means “safety.”

So the idea behind “that you may have certainty” in Luke 1:4 is that you may know not just the things you’ve been taught, but also something about them: their locked-down, secure, unshakable, solid, stable, immovable reality.

The Kind of Knowing That Lasts

I stress this not only because Luke puts it first, but because we live in a day when many Christians—perhaps like Theophilus—have been taught things, but they do not know those things this way. They know them the way one knows a cloud, not the way one knows a mountain. Viewpoints about God and the Bible, and right and wrong, float in people’s minds, ready at any moment to be blown away by the slightest resistance and replaced by another cloud.

Luke does not want Theophilus—or you—to know these things that way. He wants us to know the *asphaleian* of the things—not

just the things, not just the doctrines, but also the *asphaleian* of them. They are the kind of reality that is locked-down, secure, safe, stable, unchanging. I write my Gospel, says Luke, that you may know “the safety—the bolted-down security—the *asphaleian*” of what you’ve been taught. These things are safe from being stolen, safe from being changed, safe from ceasing to be what they are, safe from becoming unimportant or irrelevant, safe from not being reality anymore. These things, Theophilus, will always be.

This is the kind of knowing that caused the church to survive through three centuries of frequent and terrible persecution. This is the kind of knowing that is immovable in the face of disease, abandonment, disillusionment, grief, and martyrdom. Luke has tended Paul’s body through countless beatings and imprisonments (2 Cor. 11:23). He knows what kind of knowing lasts and what kind doesn’t.

Most Excellent Danger

Luke knows the kind of knowing that tempts “*most excellent Theophilus*” (1:3). He writes about “*most excellent Felix*” in Acts 24. He writes about “*most excellent Festus*” in Acts 26. Luke tells us that most excellent Felix had “a rather accurate knowledge of the Way” (Acts 24:22), but he was alarmed at Paul’s preaching, sent him away (v. 25), and then hoped for a bribe from him (v. 26). This is the kind of “accurate knowing” that destroys churches, leaves courageous Christians in jail, and brings the whole Christian movement into disrepute.

When Paul preached to “most excellent Festus,” the governor said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind” (Acts 26:24). And Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words” (v. 25). It is dangerous to be a “most excellent” anything. Locked-down, secure, unchangeable knowledge has a way of troubling the rich and powerful. You can’t buy truth with your riches. You can’t control it with your power.

It's just too risky to know things that way. It doesn't give you enough wiggle room.

But this is what Luke is after for "most excellent Theophilus." He is saying: I am writing not just that you may know the things you've been taught about Jesus, but that you may know the *asphaleian* of them—the locked-down, unshakable, unchanging, absolutely secure reality of them. That you may know they *are*—like mountains, not clouds.

Weaving Together Jesus and the Baptist

How does Luke help Theophilus (and us) in Luke 1–2 know the securely locked-down, unchangeable nature of the reality of what he's been taught? He does it by weaving together the stories of Jesus and John the Baptist—the announcements of their births, the ways they were conceived, the ways they were born, the songs their parents sang over them, and even an encounter between them while they were still in the wombs of their mothers.

And in telling these stories of John and Jesus, Luke makes clear and solid the most important realities in the universe: God, Christ, salvation, and faith. That's my outline. First, Theophilus, I want you to know the *asphaleian* of God.

1. The Certainty of God

"Zechariah was serving as priest before *God*" (Luke 1:8). Gabriel appeared to him and said, "I stand in the presence of *God*" (v. 19). Zechariah's son, Gabriel said, "will turn many . . . to the Lord their *God*" (v. 16). Later, "Gabriel was sent from *God*" to the Virgin Mary (v. 26) and said: "You have found favor with *God*" (v. 30); "The Lord *God* will give [your son] the throne of his father David" (v. 32); "The child . . . will be . . . the Son of *God*" (v. 35); and "Nothing will be impossible with *God*" (v. 37). Then Mary sang, "My spirit rejoices in *God*" (v. 47). When John was born and Zechariah's mouth was opened, he worshiped, saying, "Blessed be the Lord *God*" (v. 68). When Jesus was born, "a multitude of the heav-

only host [praised] *God*" (2:13), saying, "Glory to *God* in the highest" (v. 14). When Jesus was presented in the temple, Simeon took him up "and blessed *God*" (v. 28). Old Anna gave "thanks to *God*" (v. 38). And Jesus as a boy "increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with *God* and man" (v. 52).

In case Theophilus misses the point about God, Luke makes the same point about the Lord. Zechariah and Elizabeth walked "blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the *Lord*" (1:6). There appeared to Zechariah "an angel of the *Lord*" (v. 11), who told him his son would be "great before the *Lord*" (v. 15). The angel said he would "make ready for the *Lord* a people prepared" (v. 17). When Elizabeth conceived, she said, "Thus the *Lord* has done for me" (v. 25). The angel came to Mary and said, "The *Lord* is with you!" (v. 28). She responded, "I am the servant of the *Lord*" (v. 38). When Elizabeth met Mary, she said, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the *Lord*" (v. 45). Then Mary sang over her son, "My soul magnifies the *Lord*" (v. 46). All the friends of Elizabeth heard "that the *Lord* had shown great mercy to her" (v. 58). When her son, John, was born, "the hand of the *Lord* was with him" (v. 66). His father prophesied over him, "You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the *Lord*" (v. 76). When Jesus was born, "an angel of the *Lord*" came to the shepherds (2:9). They spoke of "this thing . . . which the *Lord* has made known to us" (v. 15). And in the temple, Mary and Joseph presented Jesus "to the *Lord*" (v. 22), according to what was written "in the Law of the *Lord*" (v. 24).

WHERE "GOD CENTERED" COMES FROM

Sometimes people wonder where phrases such as "God saturated," "God besotted," and "God centered" come from. They come from Bible stories like this. This story is mainly about God. God is the main actor in this story. He is central, dominant, and all-pervasive. And if you stretch your view out over the whole Gospel, it's still true. Matthew uses the words *God* and *Lord* 59 times, but Luke

194 times—three times as often—even though the two Gospels are almost identical in length. Luke also uses the terms three times as often as Mark and about twice as often as John.

Most excellent Theophilus, here is the first locked-down, unshakable, secure, mountainlike reality in everything you've been taught: *God is real. God is active. God is unstoppable.* God sent his angel. God struck Zechariah dumb. God made the barren Elizabeth and the Virgin Mary conceive. With God, nothing is impossible (1:37).

And when we get to the end of the story, Luke tells us that Jesus was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23), and that “Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, [were gathered] to do whatever [God’s] hand and [God’s] plan had predestined to take place” (4:27–28).

Theophilus, mark this one down. *God is the main reality in the universe. God is the main reality in history. God is the main reality in this Gospel. He is all-planning, all-pervasive, all-powerful.* Know the *asphaleian* of the doctrine of God—the locked-down, unshakable, never-changing, ever-relevant, mountainlike reality of God.

2. The Certainty of Jesus

Second, Theophilus, know the secure, solid, unshakable reality of Jesus:

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow

you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.” (Luke 1:31–35)

The first clue for Theophilus that something really extraordinary is happening in history is the word of Gabriel that Jesus will reign over the house of Jacob forever and his kingdom will have no end (v. 33). A king is about to be born, Gabriel says, whose kingdom will never be overthrown. It will outlast every other kingdom, and therefore it is a universal kingdom, not just a Jewish kingdom, though it clearly fulfills all the Old Testament Jewish hopes. This king will reign over the house of David.

But God could raise an ordinary man from the dead and make him an eternal messiah-king. So God did something at this birth to make clear that Jesus was no ordinary man. God himself, by the Holy Spirit, brought into being a man who was infinitely more than a man. The “therefore” in the middle of verse 35 links the work of the Holy Spirit in this conception with the title *Son of God*: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; *therefore* the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.”

AN UTTERLY UNIQUE SONSHIP

This is not sonship like the sonship all believers have with God. We are born according to the flesh and then reborn by the Holy Spirit. Jesus was not born by the union of a man and a woman, but by the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit replacing the seed of a man. Born of Mary, Jesus was fully human; the Holy Spirit so united the eternal second person of the Godhead with Jesus’s human nature that Jesus was and is simultaneously truly human and truly God, with a human nature and a divine nature united in one person.

There are two more pointers to this in the context. When pregnant Mary went to visit pregnant Elizabeth, John the Baptist leaped in his mother’s womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, crying out a blessing that included these words: “And why is this granted to me that the mother of my *Lord* should come to me?”

(Luke 1:43). The word *Lord* is used twenty-eight times in Luke 1–2. All of them refer to God. Even here Elizabeth was speaking by the Holy Spirit, and in the same breath said, “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the *Lord*” (Luke 1:45). So she used the word *Lord* for the God who spoke through Gabriel *and* for the child in Mary’s womb.

THE LORD’S CHRIST AND CHRIST THE LORD

Similarly, we get the double use of the title *Lord* in relation to the title *Christ*. Luke says that it had been revealed to Simeon “that he would not see death before he had seen the *Lord’s Christ*” (Luke 2:26). And the angels said, “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the *Lord*” (Luke 2:11). This Jesus is the Lord’s Christ, and he is Christ the Lord.

So, Theophilus, the second reality that is locked-down solid, safe, and sure like a mountain range of glory is that a king has been born who fulfills all the dreams of Israel, who will reign forever until every kingdom is his kingdom, and who is the one and only Son of God by virtue of his two natures, one fully divine from eternity past and the other fully human as he was made flesh. This Jesus, Theophilus, is the Lord. This Jesus is God.

3. The Certainty of Salvation

Third, Theophilus, know the unshakable, locked-down, never-to-be-altered reality that this Jesus saves his people from their sins by dying in their place.

At his birth, the angels said, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior” (Luke 2:11). Zechariah said, God “has raised up a horn of salvation for us” (1:69). And how would this salvation come? From what do we most need saving? Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 67), said of his son John, “You will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins” (vv. 76–77).

Theophilus, you are a sinner. You need a Savior who can deal

with your sins and forgive them. This Jesus, this God-man, is your Savior. He dealt with your sins and forgave them. How did he do that? He set his face to die for you. He said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Luke 9:22). This was his plan, his mission.

NEW-COVENANT BLOOD

Why? How could this save anyone? It saves because his blood is the blood of the new covenant in which God promised to forgive the sins of his people: “I will make a new covenant. . . . I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jer. 31:31, 34). And at his Last Supper, Jesus took the cup and said, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20).

That is how sins are forgiven. That is how he is a Savior. That is how Zechariah’s prophecy was ultimately fulfilled (1:76–77). In the old covenant, animal sacrifices were offered over and over again. In the new covenant, Jesus “suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3:18).

So, Theophilus, know the *asphaleian*—the locked-down, absolutely secure, never-changing reality of your God, of the God-man Jesus Christ, and of your salvation in the forgiveness of your sins by the shedding of his blood. Know these things like you know mountains, not like you know clouds.

4. The Certainty of Faith

Fourth, Theophilus, know with rock-solid, unshakable certainty that there is a way for you to have this salvation and a way for you to miss it. I speak to you now as to “*most excellent* Theophilus.” I have shown you the work of God in history; now be sure you see the work of God in the soul. God has brought salvation into history. Now God brings the human soul into salvation.

God’s salvation has happened in real, locked-down, totally

fixed, secure, non-mythological, unchangeable history. This history is populated with real people: Herod, king of Judah; Zechariah, priest of the division of Abijah; Elizabeth, of the daughters of Aaron; Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor; Quirinius, governor of Syria; Jesus, born in Bethlehem, blessed in Jerusalem, and raised in Nazareth, not Olympus. This is dateable history, not fiction. Know the solidity and reality of this, Theophilus.

RESPONDING LIKE MARY

And just as real, unalterable, and historical as the way salvation came into history is the way the human soul enters into salvation. It is possible to miss salvation, Theophilus. Just because Jesus came into the world does not mean that you will come into him.

Don't miss this, Theophilus—don't miss the difference between Zechariah's response to the good news and Mary's response. Gabriel was sent from God (Luke 1:26). He brought an old and barren couple (Zechariah and Elizabeth) spectacular news: they would have a son, and he would be the long-expected, Elijahlike forerunner of the Messiah (1:17). But Zechariah did not rejoice at this. He questioned, "How shall I know this?" (v. 18). Theophilus, this is not the way to receive the news of salvation.

The angel answered him with indignation: "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. 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" (Luke 1:19–20). When God sends his word of salvation to you, Theophilus, this is not the way to enter it.

Look, rather, to Mary, to whom God also sent the angel Gabriel, who said:

Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give

to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. (Luke 1:30–33)

And Mary did not say, “How shall I know this?” God had told her it would be. She said, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (1:34). The angel answered her question and told her how it would be. The Holy Spirit would do this thing (v. 35). And the angel gave her more hope: *nothing will be impossible with God, and your barren relative Elizabeth is six months pregnant*. To this, Mary responded, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (v. 38).

MARY’S SONG OF FAITH

What do you call this response, Theophilus? I’ll tell you what you call it. You call it what Elizabeth called it. When she and Mary met, Elizabeth said, “Blessed is she who *believed* that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (1:45). Zechariah did not believe the word of God (v. 19). Mary did.

Then she sang. She sang for you, *most excellent* Theophilus. She sang a song of faith for you:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. . . .
And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty. (Luke 1:46–53)

Be humbled, most excellent Theophilus, be brought low before the might and the mercy of the God of Israel. Let no office, no

power, no wealth, and no pleasure make the faith of Mary too hard for you. There is one way into this salvation. It is not the way of wealth, the way of power, or the way of doubt. It is the way of faith. God has acted. God is speaking. Trust him. If you would go down to your house justified, join the lowly and say, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13).

HOW TO HAVE THIS SALVATION

Beware, most excellent Theophilus, of banking on your wealth: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:25). But you *can* enter. Mary has made that plain: “What is impossible with man is possible with God” (18:27; 1:37).

Do not boast in your uprightness, Theophilus. Rather, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, “We are unworthy servants” (Luke 17:10). But don’t despair. Though you are not a Jew, Simeon has made it clear: *Jesus is for everyone*, “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to [God’s] people Israel” (2:32). There is hope for you—and all Gentiles—most excellent Theophilus, but you must humble yourself: “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (18:17).

Salvation has come into the world, Theophilus. Know the rock-solid, objective, unalterable factuality of the unfathomable, mountainlike truths of God, of the God-man Jesus Christ, and of salvation in the forgiveness of sins by his new-covenant blood.

But also know this: there is a way to enter this salvation, and there is a way to miss it. “Enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able” (Luke 13:24). Renounce all reliance on your wealth, your power, your office, and your uprightness, and receive this salvation like a child, like Mary.

Ringings with Joy

And one more thing, Theophilus. Have you noticed? This story rings with joy. The angel to Zechariah: “You will have *joy* and *glad-*

ness, and many will rejoice at [John's] birth" (Luke 1:14). John himself could not even wait to be born before he rejoiced in Jesus; as Elizabeth said to Mary, "When the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy" (v. 44). So Mary sang her *Magnificat*: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (vv. 46–47). When John was born, all the neighbors rejoiced with Elizabeth (v. 58). And when Jesus was born, the angelic announcement came, "Behold, I bring you good news of great joy" (2:10).

Theophilus, you have now heard of the Holy Spirit. By him was the God-man, Jesus Christ, conceived in a virgin's womb. All this joy is his work. This is his great work. John, filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:15). Zechariah, filled with the Spirit (v. 67). Elizabeth, filled with the Spirit (v. 41). Simeon, covered with the Spirit (2:25).

The Happiest Story in the World

Do you have the Holy Spirit, Theophilus? The great mark of the followers of Jesus is the joy of the Holy Spirit. And the great mark of that joy is that it magnifies the Lord: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46–47).

Know this, Theophilus. I have written these things, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know this *asphaleian*, this certainty. It is a locked-down, rock-solid, unshakable, unalterable reality. God is the great actor and the great goal of this story. He is at the beginning, planning all things; he is in the middle, governing all things; and he is at the end, being magnified in all things. Jesus Christ, the God-man, is his divine Son. Salvation is his glorious work. And childlike faith is your way in. Go join the shepherds, Theophilus, glorifying and praising God (Luke 2:20). Be filled with the Holy Spirit. This is the happiest story in the world.

“BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”

—Jesus (Luke 9:20)

In this collection of biblical expositions, eight prominent Bible teachers look to the Gospel of Luke and its unique portrait of our Savior, exploring everything from the nature of Jesus’s divine sonship to his rejection by the religious and political rulers of his day. Chapters include:

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BIBLICAL STUDIES

