

Find the Certainty You're Looking For

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[0:00] So if you have a Bible, if you picked up one of these purple Luke's Gospels, this is where we're going to be this Sunday and right through till Easter Sunday, just thinking about some of the big themes and claims that are made in here.

This morning we're kicking off thinking about certainty. You'll see it on the screen. Find the certainty that you're looking for. So maybe you want to turn to page one in that. We're going to take in verses one to four of Luke chapter one.

So please do have it open in front of you and we'll refer to it as you go. We're going to read it in about 10 minutes time. But maybe to get us into this theme this morning, Alex isn't here so I can talk about her when she's not here.

Here's one of Alex's dreams. She'd love to own a baby grand piano. And so we've got this bay window in our house that would be perfect to sit in and we've got this view of Arthur's seat.

If you've been to our house, you'll know the one I mean. And you kind of look out over it and you think, goodness me, that would be a lovely dream to have, wouldn't it? She's got this dream of owning a baby grand piano.

[1:08] And so you wouldn't believe my luck when I got an email last summer saying, it came into the church account, saying, free baby grand piano to the first person to respond.

And I couldn't believe my luck. I thought I was in for husband of the year. So I emailed back and said, I'd be interested. Could you show me the dimensions and I'll work out if it's going to fit.

And the person emailed me straight back, gave me those dimensions and we're going back and forth. And this person on the other end of the email chain is telling me about how her husband used to love playing hymns on it.

And the fact that maybe we were going to do the same thing, it would have meant an awful lot to him. And this story is going on and on. And the person on the other side of the email says, all you need to do, they've thought ahead.

They've got a removal company who are going to do it for her and bring it down. All you need to do is just transfer the money to this account and we'll sort everything else. You don't need to worry about a thing.

[2:11] And there's images of what the grand piano looks like. And I'm thinking, this is incredible. But for some reason, I stopped and I thought, I'll just Google this.

And you know where this is going, don't you? Threads everywhere. Scam. Beware. Warning. People change. It's the same email, just they've changed the name of the person who's deceased. And on and on this goes. And see this feeling. There she is. This feeling that I got in that moment where I'd almost been duped.

If you've ever had that feeling in your life, you'll know how horrible it is. That you almost were taken in hook, line, sinker by this deal. And in a way, is that not kind of symptomatic as to how everyday life feels sometimes?

Yeah? So we used to talk in generations gone past. We used to talk about how our word is our bond. Remember that phrase, if you were a certain generation, my word is my bond?

[3:18] We used to talk about things like gentlemen's agreements. But today, we're much more used to hearing about things like NDAs and offshore bank accounts and fact-checking, summed up in the runner-up of the word of the year in 2023.

And I'll tell you the winner in just a moment. The runner-up of the word of the year in 2023. Deep fake. Meaning that today, total trust is in short supply. Total trust, short supply. And we think, we can be tempted to think, we don't trust people out there. So who can we trust? Where do we go? Will we run in here? Maybe the only person that I can trust in life is myself. And you think you can get away with that for a little bit. But we all know when we look inside, it's just not quite as simple as that. In fact, here's a little thing for you. Did you know that in 2014, there was a study done on science.org? And believe me, this actually is a thing.

[4:31] That found that when given the choice, people preferred getting a mild electric shock than being left alone with their thoughts. It's a real thing, right?

67% of men preferred an electric shock than being left alone with their thoughts. 25% of women. Now that, you have to say, is a really niche study. And it sounds so strange, doesn't it? But I'll tell you what's even more strange. Is that I kind of get it. Tell you what I'm afraid of at night. I go to bed each evening.

The thing I'm scared of isn't the dark. It isn't the monsters in the cupboard. It's not being able to sleep. And sitting there, just lying there, staring at the ceiling. Just me and my thoughts. You like me? Yeah? Your body's sitting there going, I just want to go to sleep. And yet your mind is, yeah? Wide awake.

[5:33] It's active. It's ready to go. And you think, the last thing I want to do is be left alone with my thoughts. Because we are complicated creatures. Right?

Our moods, they fluctuate. They go up and down. Our emotions change from one day to the next. Our motives are a mixed bag. I mean, I look back on things that I was sure of in terms of decisions in my life from years ago.

And I think, goodness me, thank you, Lord, that you saved me from that decision. Yeah? Our knowledge is limited. We only know so a little fraction of the whole picture.

And that's the problem, is it not? When our world tells us to be true to ourselves. I always think of Buddy's line in the film, The Incredibles, if you've ever seen it.

Do you know the one when little Buddy is speaking to Mr. Incredible, the guy who he just wants to grow up and be like? And he says this line, and I love it. He says, you always say be true to yourself, but you never say which part of yourself to be true to.

[6:37] And who knew Pixar could be so deep? Yeah? So where does that leave us then? In this world that's searching for certainty, where does that leave us?

If we can't find it out there and we struggle, we definitely can't find it in here. Where does that leave us? Well, I've got a pastor friend called Sam. Sam is a pastor of a Redeemer church in Collington, the south of the city.

He was telling me just this during the week about how a man rocked up in his church a few Sundays ago and said to him, cards on the table, I don't think I believe this stuff.

I'm not sure where I am on this whole Jesus thing, but I'm here because the one thing that I'm searching for in life is integrity. Isn't that interesting?

Integrity. You know, the runner-up in that 2023 word of the year was, were you listening? Deepfake. Do you know what the winner was? Authentic.

[7:42] Again, really interesting, isn't it? Where we're at as a culture, authentic. And maybe that's you this morning. Maybe you're craving for something that you can base your life upon.

Maybe it's a friend that you have. Maybe it's a family member that you can think of. If that's connecting with you in any sort of way, here's the wonderful news. You've come to the right place. That's what's on offer here today. That's what Luke, as we read these first four verses, is going to hold out to us today. It's the word certainty. Now, who's this man called Luke?

Well, Luke is this doctor turned historian. Luke is this professional guy who has an eye for facts. And Luke is a man who has written this two-volume account of Jesus' life and the acts of the early church called Luke and Acts.

[8:40] And Luke is writing for this man. If you've got it there, verse one. This man called Theophilus. Whose name that you'll see if you have it there at the end of verse three.

Whose name means Theophilus. Theophilus. It just means lover of God. Friend of God. That's this man. And the fact, you see, that Luke calls him not just Theophilus.

He calls him most excellent Theophilus. Shows that this man is someone who has big esteem. Right? He's a big deal.

He carries a bit of gravitas, this guy Theophilus. And what's happened is Theophilus has likely commissioned this man called Luke. A bit like a private investigator.

He's commissioned them to do a research project on Jesus. Because what is Theophilus seeking when it comes to Jesus?

[9:38] This man who he's clearly heard so much about. What is he seeking? He's seeking certainty. Do you see it there? In other words, Luke, I want to know that I can trust this stuff.

And so Luke takes up the challenge. And he writes this account of Jesus' life. And he states up the top that he wants to provide Theophilus with certainty.

Why don't we see what he writes? Here's the first four verses of Luke chapter 1. So Luke writes this. Have you got it there? Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us.

Just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things that you have been taught.

So see over the next 10 minutes, folks, whenever you think about this stuff, whenever you're at on this stuff, can I just point out three things that Luke's trying to do in these first four verses?

[11:09] Three things that he wants Theophilus to know before he reads on. Here's the first thing. He wants him to know about his sources. Do you see that? His sources.

So before Luke gets to what happened when it comes to Jesus, Luke tells us where it happened and why it happened. Do you see that in verse 1?

He says the things fulfilled among us. Do you notice that phrase? The things fulfilled among us. So all the things that he's about to tell us about, all the things that Luke has written about in the remaining 24 chapters happened not in a galaxy far, far away.

Do you see it? Nor did they happen in a distant land long, long ago. No, all of this happened, end of verse 1, among us.

So it happened right here. You can meet people. You can talk to people. He's going to tell them that he did that. It happened among us. Luke can't get his head around us. It happened here, right here.

[12:14] And it wasn't random. Jesus showing up. The words fulfill, or maybe you've got there, accomplished, shows that Luke perceives that with all these events, with the coming of Jesus, all of this is part of a bigger story.

That's what he perceives, that with the arrival of Jesus, what was happening was God making good on the promises that he made to his people and to the world in what we call the Old Testament.

All these promises are coming to fulfillment. And because that is such a big deal, Luke wants Theophilus to be sure about where he got his intel from.

Yeah, do you see how he's not gone Wikipedia? If you're a student, you know, you don't put that in your footnotes, okay? He doesn't carry any kind of gravitas. He's not gone Wikipedia. He's not gone YouGov poll saying, can I have five minutes of your time to complete a survey?

Here's the survey. What do you think happened? He's not done that either. He's not gone hearsay. Where's he gone? Do you see it? He's gone straight for the eyewitnesses.

[13:35] Now that word in Greek is where we get our word autopsy from. If you're interested, I've watched enough episodes of Silent Witness in my time to know what an autopsy is, okay?

It's somebody who was there and who saw it with their own eyes. And historicity really matters, doesn't it?

In life, historicity really matters when it comes to this kind of stuff. Because Luke would have been well aware that the leading historians in his day were convinced that for anything to be considered, credible history, it had to be written when events were still in people's living memory.

Makes total sense, doesn't it? Josephus, others around about the time, it has to be in living memory. And that eyewitness testimony strikes you as you read Luke's gospel all the way through. And that's the challenge off the back of this. If you've never read it for yourself, or maybe you've read it and you think I've done it a long time ago, go back and read it through these lenses. He gives us tons of details, yeah?

[14:49] Look for these. People's names everywhere. Names that stack up as being common for those used in the days.

So, for example, it shouldn't surprise us in this gospel that there's more than one Mary. Yeah? Shouldn't surprise us. Really common name back in the day. The flip is true, I think.

It would be way more suspicious if there wasn't. Luke records people's reactions. He records numbers. He records place names.

He records geographical details. He records the names of governors. He records the names of historical events like the census. Now, many of you will be in jobs where they say, and this is what they said to me when I started as a lawyer, they said, what we value is attention to detail.

Yeah? You had that? What we value is attention to detail. Luke's that guy as well. Luke tells Theophilus about his sources. And then secondly, do you see how he tells him about his method?

[15:57] So, go back to a minute, Luke's method. Building on those eyewitness sources, what did Luke do? Do you see? He carefully investigated everything.

So, he's really thorough. That's what he's saying. What would we say today, our phrase that we have? He left no stone unturned. Yeah? And notice from when?

So, from the beginning. So, Luke's gone right back to the start. And what he's done is he's sought with all this data that he's collected to produce it in a way that Theophilus is going to follow.

So, that's what the phrase there, orderly account, means. From the birth of Jesus right through to his death and resurrection, he's thought about how he's going to present the facts that he's gathered.

And see, when you add that together with the other three Gospels that we have. So, there's four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. What that means is summarized by a man called Peter Williams who works for a biblical research center down in Cambridge called Tyndale House.

[17:07] And he's written this great book called Can We Trust the Gospels? And this is what he writes, and there's a quote on the screen. It may be thus concluded that Jesus has more extended text about him in general closer proximity to his death than his contemporary Tiberius, the most famous person in the then known world.

It's amazing the amount of facts that we have in Jesus' life. But before we think this is just an exercise in facts, we've got to appreciate that Luke goes further than that.

He's not just a historian. He's also a theologian. He goes further than that. He wants Theophilus to make a response to the facts. And that's the last thing we need to see here.

Luke tells Theophilus about his method. And then thirdly, he tells him about his goal. That's what he means when he says, beginning of verse 4, you see it in the text, so that, that's what that phrase indicates, so that, so that you may have, and there's our bingo words, certainty about the things that you've been taught.

So he's saying that you can trust this stuff. You can really trust it. And it really matters that Theophilus gets that in his head from the start.

[18:34] Because just flip over just a few verses, and all of a sudden you're into supernatural stuff.

This is not life as we know it, right? So you have angels, you have a virgin birth, you have healings, you have feedings, you have a man risen from the dead, you read this all the way through.

This isn't stuff that normally happens. But Luke is saying that in a sense it's not about whether we believe it happened, it's the fact that we can trust the credibility of the fact the people around and we're telling us that it did happen.

And just in case I've lost you at this point, you think all this kind of supernatural stuff, I don't know what I think about that. Can I just put it to you that many people today believe, and perhaps you're one of them, that what we can see in front of us isn't all there is.

You know, I was listening to Welsh singer Catherine Jenkins on the Ryland show on Radio 2 last Saturday and she's talking about how before each performance she has, she goes to her dressing room and she just has 10 minutes alone with her dad.

[20:00] And you think there's nothing strange about that, what on earth is that? But she went on to explain the fact that her dad died when she was 15. Tragically. And she's now 45.

So her dad has been dead for 30 years and yet she still spends 10 minutes before every show just speaking to him. And I guess the question is, when we think about this stuff, is on what basis do you think that there's something more beyond this life than what we can see?

Luke says to Theophilus, don't go with a hunch, don't go with your gut, right? Go with the facts.

Because that phrase, do you see how he writes it?

Of the things you have been taught. Do you see that phrase? It suggests, doesn't it, that Theophilus has perhaps heard snippets of things about Jesus.

He's heard rumors, he's been given certain things and he's just not sure what he makes of it. Now listen, maybe that's exactly where you're at this morning.

[21:13] Maybe you're, you've heard things about Jesus. Maybe you've assumed things about Jesus from friends and family and maybe what you've seen on the television.

Here's the challenge as we draw this to a close this morning. Is, is let Luke as he writes this challenge you to think about why you believe what you believe and on what grounds does it hold? You know, some of us, just as we draw this to a close from a certain vintage, will remember those Looney Tunes cartoons. Two of the main characters in that were Roadrunner and Coyote.

And if you're struggling to picture it, you think, I've never seen this before. You might have heard the phrase, meep, meep. That's Roadrunner. And Coyote was always chasing Roadrunner.

This was, this was the thing. And before Slapstick, in the days when Slapstick comedy was still a thing, I'm trying my best to bring it back. Coyote used to be an all-out pursuit of Roadrunner.

[22:29] But what would happen is in the end that he would run into a cactus or there would be a 10-ton weight that would fall on his head or something like that which was hilarious. But one of the scenes that I remember from that was that the two of them would be running towards the edge of a cliff.

And at the last minute, Roadrunner would make a turn and Coyote would run, and this is 90s graphics, but run with it. Coyote would run straight off the ledge. But the slapstick comedy element of it is that Coyote would still be running, not realizing that there was nothing underneath his feet. And all of a sudden he has that moment, and there's the moment in the thing where he stops and he realizes there's nothing holding him, and he plummets down. And it gets me every time.

And it was a lady called Rebecca McLaughlin who put me on to this. I remember she said this years ago, and it stopped me in my tracks and made me think. She said, how many of us tried to live our lives like Coyote in that moment?

We're running and we're running and we're running. Boy, are we running. But we're failing to realize that we're not standing on anything. And so here's the question as we close.

[23:46] Whoever you are here today, whatever you think about this stuff, whatever you believe in, is what is the basis for what you believe? What are you basing your life upon? And will it hold?

That's what Sophie was saying, wasn't it? Will it hold? When everything else is stripped away, what can we trust? Why not let Theophilus and his example inspire you to find out like he did from Luke that he wants to know the truth about what he can be sure about?

He wants to be certain. And Luke wants him to be certain. He wants him to be certain about the life of Jesus. He wants him to be certain about the teachings of Jesus.

He wants him to be certain about the death of Jesus. He wants him to be certain about the resurrection of Jesus. He wants him to be certain about the call of Jesus to deny self, take up our cross and follow after him.

He wants us to be certain about the fact that that is going to cost us as disciples. It's going to feel like we're walking not the wide road, but the narrow road. But he wants us to be certain that it's so worth it.

[25:04] You can be certain about the purpose of which Jesus came, he lived, he died, he rose again. You can be certain that because of him, if your faith is in him, you are right with God and you can know him as Father.

You can be certain about the church, the early church, and about how people took the gospel to the world. You can be certain about the fact that Jesus says he is the one with all authority and he's given a commission to his church to take it to their friends, family members, neighbours, colleagues, to tell them about Christ Jesus.

Maybe this morning you've never read this before in your puff. Wouldn't it be a great thing today to begin it for the first time? Do that and you'll find, like billions of Christians have throughout the ages and across the globe, that faith isn't blind.

Faith is belief based on the evidence. I'm going to pray, just as we close, a really short prayer, but I'm just going to pause just for a moment of quiet before we do that and why not maybe just gather your thoughts and respond in your own way and your prayers as well as we think about the things that we've heard and read this morning.

And so, Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning that we can have certainty in a world that seems to be changing, just like Sophie said, all the time.

[26:43] In our own personal lives that seem to be so up and down and unreliable. Father, thank you that we have your words, Luke's gospel, the facts about Jesus.

Thank you that we can be certain about him. And so, Lord, I pray that as we draw our time together to a close this morning and as we move into a time of communion, that you would remind us of the trustworthiness of all of these things.

Lord, for those of us here today who are perhaps on the fence, we think to ourselves, we don't know what we think about this. May even today be the day when you open their eyes to the truth of who Jesus is.

Father, thank you for your steadfast love for us. And we pray all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen.