

TODAY

A Catholic Journey Through the Gospel of Luke

SESSION 1

An Orderly Account

Luke 1:1–38

Prologue and Annunciation: the Gospel of certainty begins with a yes

Leader Preparation Guide

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: Participants discover that Luke writes as a careful historian for the sake of catechesis, and that the Annunciation is saturated with Old Testament language: Gabriel from Daniel, the Davidic covenant from 2 Samuel 7, and a mysterious word about the Most High overshadowing Mary whose source we will deliberately leave unresolved tonight.

Catholic Touchstone: Mary's *fiat* as the obedience of faith that reverses Eve's disobedience (CCC 494), and the angel's greeting *kecharitōmenē* as a scriptural root the Church's Marian doctrine grows from. A second, quieter touchstone: Luke 1:4 uses the verb *katēcheō*, the word catechesis itself. Your small group tonight is doing exactly what Luke wrote this Gospel for.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Luke opens with a formal literary preface of the kind Greek historians used, naming his method: he has followed everything closely, consulted eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, and set it down in order so that Theophilus may know the certainty of what he was taught. No other Gospel begins this way. Luke is announcing that Christian faith rests on testimony that can be investigated, not on private feeling. The name Theophilus means lover of God, and the title most excellent suggests a real man of rank, likely a catechumen or new convert, though the Fathers also delighted in reading the name as every soul that loves God.

Church tradition, attested by St. Irenaeus and the Muratorian fragment in the second century, identifies the author as Luke, the beloved physician and companion of St. Paul (Col 4:14, 2 Tim 4:11). Modern scholarship debates how much weight the tradition can bear, and the book itself is formally anonymous, so hold the attribution with honest confidence rather than as a proven fact: the external testimony is early, unanimous, and names a minor figure no one would invent.

Luke then gives us two annunciations built as deliberate parallels. Gabriel appears to Zechariah in the Temple at the altar of incense and to Mary in an obscure Galilean village. Both are troubled, both are told do not be afraid, both receive a promised son with a mission, and both ask a question. The difference between the questions is the theological engine of the passage. Zechariah asks for proof: how shall I know this, since he and Elizabeth are old. Mary asks about the manner: how can this be, since she has no husband. Zechariah doubts the message; Mary believes it and asks how God will accomplish it. He is struck mute; she is given an explanation and a sign she never requested. Faith is not the absence of questions. It is the direction the question points.

Gabriel's words to Mary in 1:32–33 are a mosaic of the covenant God swore to David in 2 Samuel 7: the throne of his father David, reign over the house of Jacob, a kingdom without end. First-century ears would have heard an unmistakable claim: the Messiah is here. And Gabriel himself is a signal. He appears by name in only one other book of the Bible, Daniel, where he delivers the timetable of seventy weeks until the anointed one comes. When Gabriel shows up again after five centuries of silence, the clock has run out.

The greeting itself repays close attention. Gabriel does not address Mary by her name but by a title: *chaire, kecharitōmenē*, rejoice, having-been-and-remaining-graced, a perfect passive participle used as a form of address, unique in Scripture. The steelman chain in tonight's discussion takes the strongest Protestant reading of this word seriously before pressing back, so read that section carefully in advance. Finally, 1:35 contains a word we will plant and refuse to harvest: the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Participants will write a sealed guess about where they have met that image before. Do not resolve it. It pays off in Session 6.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

2 Sam 7:12-16 Davidic covenant: throne, house, kingdom without end — **Lk 1:32-33**

Dan 9:21-27 Gabriel announces the timetable of the anointed one — **Lk 1:19, 26**

Zeph 3:14-17 Rejoice, daughter of Zion, the King of Israel is in your midst — **Lk 1:28**

Ex 40:34-35 The cloud overshadows the tabernacle (leader's eyes only: sealed guess, resolves Session 6) — **Lk 1:35**

Gen 18:14 Is anything too hard for the Lord? Sarah's impossible son — **Lk 1:37**

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Irenaeus of Lyons (*Against Heresies III, 22, 4*)

The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience. What the virgin Eve bound through her unbelief, the Virgin Mary loosed through her faith. Irenaeus, taught by St. Polycarp who was taught by St. John, gives us the New Eve reading within living memory of the apostles, and the Catechism makes his sentence its own in CCC 494.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Ambrose of Milan (*Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke, Book II*)

Ambrose contrasts the two questions asked of Gabriel. Zechariah doubted that an aged woman could conceive and asked for proof; Mary, promised something far more impossible, did not doubt that it would happen but asked only how it would come about. Her question was the inquiry of faith seeking understanding, not of unbelief seeking evidence, which is why the same angel silences one and answers the other.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (*Homilies in Praise of the Blessed Virgin Mother, Homily 4*)

In a passage the Church reads every Advent, Bernard imagines all creation holding its breath between Gabriel's question and Mary's answer: Adam and the patriarchs, the whole waiting world, begging the Virgin to speak the word that heaven and earth await. Answer quickly, O Virgin, Bernard pleads: the whole economy of the Incarnation waited in that silence on a free and faithful

yes.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 484–486 The Annunciation inaugurates the fullness of time; the Holy Spirit is sent to sanctify the womb of the Virgin.

CCC 490–493 Full of grace: the Church's reflection on Gabriel's greeting and the grace given Mary from her conception.

CCC 494 Mary's fiat as the obedience of faith; the Irenaeus knot passage quoted directly.

CCC 2676 The Hail Mary unpacked: the greeting of Gabriel and Elizabeth, the daughter of Zion, the dwelling of God with His people.

CCC 4–6 Catechesis defined: the same word Luke uses in 1:4 for what Theophilus received.

THREAD WATCH

Overshadow (SEALED GUESS, plants tonight, resolves Session 6): Lk 1:35 uses *episkiazō*.

Participants seal a written guess on Take-Home 1 about where God's presence overshadows something in the Old Testament. The same verb returns at the Transfiguration cloud in Lk 9:34, and both are commonly read as evoking Ex 40:34-35, where the Greek Old Testament uses this same verb for the glory cloud filling the tabernacle. Say nothing tonight.

Temple bookends (plants tonight, resolves Session 14): The Gospel opens with a priest at the incense altar. Watch where Luke chooses to end. Do not flag this for the group; let the symmetry land in the final session.

Mary ponders (plants tonight, develops Session 2): Mary considers Gabriel's greeting in 1:29; she will treasure and ponder in 2:19 and 2:51. Luke is sketching the first and model disciple.

Today / sēmeron (plants Session 3): Not yet in play, but be ready: the study's title word first sounds in the Nazareth synagogue.

SESSION GOALS

1. Establish Luke's historical method and catechetical purpose from the prologue, and connect *katēcheō* to what your group is doing right now.
2. Trace the parallel structure of the two annunciations and articulate the difference between Zechariah's question and Mary's.
3. Let the group discover Gabriel's Daniel 9 backstory and the 2 Samuel 7 covenant language for themselves, live, with Bibles open.
4. Run the *kecharitōmenē* steelman chain honestly: present the Protestant reading at full strength before pressing back from the grammar and the greeting's uniqueness.
5. Plant the sealed overshadow guess on Take-Home 1 without resolving it, and close on Mary's fiat as the pattern of every disciple's yes.

Time Note (75–90 minutes)

If the evening runs long, cut Question 3 (the Daniel 9 discovery) first and simply state Gabriel's pedigree in one sentence, then drop the Dig Deeper boxes. Never cut Question 5 (the steelman chain) or Question 8 (the fiat); they are the session's spine. The sealed guess takes ninety seconds and must happen.

Discussion Guide

OPENING PRAYER

Leader: *Come, Holy Spirit, who overshadowed the Virgin of Nazareth. As we open this Gospel written so that we might know the certainty of the things we have been taught, give us Luke's care for the truth and Mary's readiness to say yes. Teach us in these fourteen weeks to hear the word of God and keep it. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

WIN: OPENING QUESTIONS (10 MIN)

W1. When someone tells you news that sounds too good to be true, what actually convinces you to believe them?

W2. Think of one thing about the faith you believed as a kid simply because someone you trusted taught it to you. Have you ever gone back and checked it out for yourself? What happened?

BUILD: INTO THE TEXT (50–60 MIN)

HOW TO LEAD THIS SECTION

Ask each question and wait. Let the group dig, disagree, and discover before you consolidate. The shaded ANSWER boxes are for you to share after the discussion, never to read in place of it. When a question sends the group to the Old Testament, have them physically find the passage; the discovery is the point.

1. Read Luke 1:1–4 aloud. What does Luke claim about his sources and his method? What does he say his goal is for Theophilus?

Leader: *Draw out the verbs: followed closely, eyewitnesses, orderly account, certainty.*

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Luke claims investigation, not invention: he has traced everything carefully from the beginning, relying on eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, and arranged it in order. His stated goal is that Theophilus may know the **certainty** of the things he was taught. The Greek verb behind taught is *katēcheō*: Theophilus has been catechized, and Luke writes to give that catechesis historical foundations. This entire study is a Luke 1:4 exercise.

2. Read Luke 1:5–25. Where exactly is Zechariah when Gabriel appears, and what is he doing? What does he ask the angel, and what does it cost him?

Leader: *Establish the Temple setting firmly; it matters later in the study more than the group knows.*

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Zechariah is a priest inside the Temple sanctuary, offering incense at the hour of prayer, as close to the presence of God as his lot will ever bring him. Told that his prayer is heard and Elizabeth will

bear a son, he asks *How shall I know this?* He wants proof, and the proof he receives is nine months of silence. Note where Luke's Gospel begins: in the Temple, at the altar. File that away.

3. Live discovery: Gabriel introduces himself by name in verse 19. This is only the second book of the Bible where Gabriel appears by name. Send the group hunting: find Daniel 9:21-27. What was Gabriel's message there, and what does his reappearance now signal?

Leader: Give them two or three minutes with Bibles. If nobody lands on Daniel, give the book and let them find the chapter.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

In Daniel 9, Gabriel delivers the prophecy of seventy weeks: a countdown until an anointed one, a messiah, comes to finish transgression and bring in everlasting righteousness. Gabriel is Scripture's timetable angel, and some Second Temple interpreters read his seventy weeks as a messianic countdown, one reason expectation ran so hot in the first century; the chronology itself remains one of Scripture's most debated. But when, after roughly five centuries without a word from him, Gabriel reappears in the Temple, Luke's first readers could hear the signal regardless of anyone's arithmetic: the Messiah is not coming someday; he is coming now.

4. Read Luke 1:26–38. The two annunciations are built as parallels: an appearance, fear, do not be afraid, a promised son, a question. Compare Zechariah's question (1:18) with Mary's (1:34). What is the difference, and why does Gabriel answer one and silence the other?

Leader: This is the heart of the parallel structure. Let the group wrestle with why one question is faith and the other is not.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Zechariah asks for verification: how shall I *know*, give me evidence. Mary asks about the manner: how *can* this be, since she has no husband. She does not doubt that God will do it; she asks how God will do it. St. Ambrose saw it precisely: hers is the question of faith seeking understanding, his the question of unbelief seeking proof, and the promise made to Mary was by far the harder one to believe. Faith is not the absence of questions but their direction.

5. Steelman chain: Gabriel greets Mary: Hail, full of grace (1:28). Many Protestant translations render this greatly favored one, and the strongest Protestant reading argues: the word describes God's favor shown to Mary for her task, not a state of sinless fullness; Stephen is called full of grace in Acts 6:8 and nobody claims he was immaculate. Take that reading seriously as a group. Then look closer at the Greek word itself, *kecharitōmenē*. What is unusual about how Gabriel uses it?

Leader: Present the Protestant case at full strength first and let it stand. Then press: the grammar, and the fact that it replaces her name.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The steelman deserves its due: the word alone, as vocabulary, does not prove the Immaculate Conception, and Catholics should not claim it does. But two features resist the thinner reading.

First, the grammar: *kecharitōmenē* is a perfect passive participle, describing a completed action with continuing results, having been and remaining graced. Stephen in Acts 6:8 is described with a different construction entirely, an adjective phrase (*plērēs charitos*, "full of grace"), not the perfect passive participle Gabriel uses; the grammar of Acts 6:8 tells us nothing either way about the duration of Stephen's grace, and we should not pretend it does. Second, Gabriel uses the word as a form of address, in place of Mary's name, as if grace-filled is who she is. The dogma rests on Scripture read within Tradition's long reflection, not on a participle alone, and we should say so honestly. But the participle is doing real work, and the Church noticed it very early.

DIG DEEPER: REJOICE, DAUGHTER OF ZION

Gabriel's opening word *chaire*, rejoice, echoes the prophets' summons to the daughter of Zion: rejoice, for the King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst (Zeph 3:14–17; see also Zech 9:9). If the echo is intended, Gabriel is greeting Mary as Israel-in-person, the daughter of Zion in whose midst, literally in whose womb, the Lord now comes to dwell. CCC 2676 builds the Hail Mary on exactly this reading.

6. Live discovery: Read Gabriel's promise in 1:32–33 slowly. This is built chiefly on one specific Old Testament passage. Find 2 Samuel 7:12–16 and map the pieces: which phrases in Gabriel's speech come from the covenant with David?

Leader: Have them build the mapping themselves, phrase by phrase, out loud.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The throne of his father David draws on the throne promise (2 Sam 7:13, 16); son of the Most High echoes I will be his father and he shall be my son (7:14); and of his kingdom there will be no end seals the promise that David's house and kingdom shall be made sure forever (7:16). Reign over the house of Jacob is Luke's own extension: the everlasting Davidic kingship now named over all Israel. 2 Samuel 7 is the principal source, but Gabriel speaks it enlarged, in covenant language any Jew would recognize, announcing that the thousand-year-old promise to David comes true in the child Mary is asked to bear.

7. Sealed guess: Gabriel answers Mary's how in 1:35: the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. That word overshadow is strange and specific. Somewhere in the Old Testament, God's presence overshadows something. On your Take-Home sheet is a box marked My Guess. Write where you think this image comes from, or your best guess at what it might mean, fold it, and do not discuss it. We will open these in a few weeks.

Leader: Ninety seconds, pens down, no discussion, no hints. Collect nothing; they keep the sheet. LEADER'S EYES ONLY: the verb is *episkiazō*, it returns at the Transfiguration cloud (Lk 9:34), and both are widely read as evoking the glory cloud filling the tabernacle in Ex 40:34–35 (the Greek OT uses the same verb there). Resolves in Session 6. Reveal nothing tonight, even if someone lands on it; smile and write down that they should say it again in Session 6.

8. Read 1:37–38 again. Gabriel offers Mary a precedent, for with God nothing will be impossible, language borrowed from the promise of a son to another woman long ago (Gen 18:14). Then Mary answers. What exactly does she consent to, and what does her yes cost her?

Leader: Slow the group down here. Betrothed virgin, small town, visible pregnancy. Let the risk register before the theology.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Mary consents to everything and specifies nothing: behold the handmaid of the Lord. She accepts a pregnancy she cannot explain to Joseph, to Nazareth, or to anyone, in a world where the explanation could cost her her betrothal and by the letter of the law her life. St. Irenaeus, within living memory of the apostles, read this verse against Genesis 3: the knot tied by Eve's unbelief is untied by Mary's faith, the New Eve whose obedience opens what disobedience closed (CCC 494). And St. Bernard pictures the whole waiting world on its knees between the angel's question and her answer, while St. Augustine supplies the principle beneath the scene: God, who created us without us, willed not to save us without us (CCC 1847). God needed no one's permission; he freely willed that our salvation should enlist our freedom, and Mary's fiat is that freedom's finest hour.

DIG DEEPER: GABRIEL'S TIMING AND THE FULLNESS OF TIME

St. Paul says God sent his Son when the time had fully come (Gal 4:4). Daniel's seventy weeks (Dan 9:24–27), delivered by this same Gabriel, was read by some Second Temple interpreters as a messianic countdown, one likely contributor to the heightened messianic expectation of the first century. Luke's chronological anchors in 1:5 and 3:1 are his historian's way of insisting: this happened, datably, when the clock struck.

SEND: TAKING IT OUT (10 MIN)

S1. Mary said yes before she understood everything, and her question was how, not prove it. Where in your life right now is God waiting on a yes you keep postponing until you have more certainty?

S2. Luke wrote an orderly account so one man could know the certainty of what he had been taught. Who catechized you, formally or not? And who might be waiting, without knowing it, for you to be their Luke?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- Pray the Angelus once a day this week, ideally at noon. It is the Church's daily rehearsal of tonight's passage; a card with the text is on your Take-Home sheet.
- Look up CCC 494 and read the St. Irenaeus quotation slowly, once, out loud.
- Before next session, read Luke 1:39–2:52: the Visitation, the Magnificat, the Nativity, and two trips to the Temple.

Scripture memory: **Luke 1:38**, *Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.* (RSV2CE)

CLOSING PRAYER

Leader: *Father, you sent your angel to a town nobody important had heard of, to a girl the world would never have chosen, and on her answer you hung the salvation of the world. Give us her faith that asks how instead of demanding proof, and her courage to answer before the cost is fully counted. Behold your servants, Lord. Let it be done to us according to your word. **Amen.***

Leader Reference Card: Session 1

Every passage used tonight, in order of appearance. Flag these in your Bible before the group arrives.

Passage Used for

Luke 1:1–4 Q1: prologue, method, katēcheō / certainty for Theophilus

Luke 1:5–25 Q2: Zechariah in the Temple, the question that asks for proof

Daniel 9:21–27 Q3 live discovery: Gabriel and the seventy-weeks countdown

Luke 1:26–38 Q4–Q8: the Annunciation

Luke 1:18 with 1:34 Q4: the two questions compared

Acts 6:8 Q5 steelman: Stephen, full of grace, the strongest counter-text

Zephaniah 3:14–17 Dig Deeper: rejoice, daughter of Zion (with Zech 9:9)

2 Samuel 7:12–16 Q6 live discovery: Davidic covenant mosaic in Lk 1:32–33

Genesis 18:14 Q8: nothing impossible with God, Sarah's precedent

Galatians 4:4 Dig Deeper: the fullness of time

CCC 484–494, 2676, 4–6 Catechism Connection

Next week: Luke 1:39–2:52, the Visitation and the Magnificat. Pack a bookmark at 2 Samuel 6; you will need it, and the group should not know why yet.