

THE CERTAINTY OF THINGS BELIEVED

by J. K. POPHAM

"That thou mightest know the certainty of those things wherein thou hast been instructed." (Luke 1:4)

Luke was inspired to collect and write the narratives concerning Christ and His sayings and His works while on earth; and he addresses these narratives, this beautiful Gospel, to his friend Theophilus, to whom also he addressed the Acts.

The text divides itself into two parts. First, the things in which Theophilus had been instructed. Second, the certainty of them; and this certainty I would notice in two ways: **I.** the certainty concerning the things written, things already known to Theophilus; and **II.** the certainty of them as made known in the hearts of God's people.

First, the things which Theophilus had been favoured to hear, had been taught. They are said to be "things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us which from the beginning were eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word." And it may be that they are all comprised in the last word of that 2nd verse, "Word." The Scripture, as now completed, contains the things; and I am disposed to say that, first of all, we may without violence speak of the Incarnate Word as intended, the eternal Word, of which John speaks in his first Epistle: "There are Three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word," etc. (1 John 5:7)--It is this Word which His ministers preached, the blessed Person of Christ, the eternal Son of God Incarnate, of whose mysterious and miraculous conception and birth the Evangelist Luke treats in this chapter. Here is a mysterious truth. Men doubt it, question it, deny it; and no wonder, when they have nothing but a corrupt reason to guide them. How can a corrupt reason lay hold of, believe, embrace, and love the truth, that the eternal God should hide Himself, as it were, in a frail human nature; that Omnipotence should hide itself behind the frailty of the Infant Jesus; that infinite Wisdom should hide itself in One whose understanding grew, who grew in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man, (Luke 2:52) whose Eternity should be linked with an Infant of days? If we are left to reason this matter out, where shall we be landed? If you have no guide but your own minds with respect to this, what will you think of the Scripture: "Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given?" (Isa. 9:6) This is the mystery of godliness, which in the church of the living God is "without controversy." The man of God needs and has the Scriptures to instruct him how to behave himself "in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." In the church "without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory." (1 Tim. 3:15,16) Everything connected with salvation is in this Man, this Person. All the life we are to have for eternity, if we are the Lord's, all the beauty we are to shine in, all the justification we are to enjoy, all the holiness which is to be our happiness, all the bliss that is to fill our very beings, all the blessed immortality that is to clothe these bodies, Christ brought to light by the gospel, Christ conveys and imparts to His people.

Every disciple is instructed in this mystery more or less distinctly--the Incarnation of the Son of God. There are very different degrees of understanding in the matter, according to the measure of faith, but the matter itself will be unquestionably received, implicitly believed in, by every Spirit-taught child of God. There are some things one cannot understand,--how that people born and taught of the Spirit should differ in some particulars; but when you come to fundamentals, one cannot believe the Holy Ghost teaches people, quickens them, and leads them, and leaves them to walk always in errors and contradictions in respect of essentials. This is the main thing, then, that the eternal God came from heaven to earth and took up His abode in human nature, took on Him the seed of Abraham, was born of a virgin, was crucified through weakness, poured out His soul unto death, dismissed His human spirit, was buried, rose again, and ascended into heaven. Have we been instructed in this? Yes, the Scriptures have instructed us in it. And here may I not say that it is a great matter to have the Scriptures of truth in our hands, and it will be a very great mercy if we are enabled very highly to value them, and diligently to read them, and prayerfully to consider them? The Scriptures of truth are given "that we through patience and comfort" of them "might have hope."

"If aught there dark appear,
Bewail thy want of sight."

But, though salvation is wrapt up in this great mystery, one may with propriety, and I hope, advantage, look at some particulars that grow out of this, and are intimately connected with it.

The Son of God, Jesus Christ, is set forth in the Scriptures as being made sin. (2 Cor. 5:21) One of the deepest mysteries that can ever occupy the minds of men, that can ever be presented to the faith of God's elect, is this, that the Almighty God, the sinless Man, should be made sin by His eternal Father; that the sins of the elect should be taken from them, and laid on Him in a legal manner, in such a true way as that it became proper for His Father to put Him to grief, to chastise and bruise Him, and pierce Him, and call upon His own sword to awake against Him, to pierce Him with grief and death; proper for the law of God to pour its vials of anger, wrath, and death into the soul of that blessed Man, Jesus Christ. (Isa. 53; Zech. 13:7) And this is a matter in which the Scriptures instruct us, and is surely believed among us; they tell us distinctly that it was so. "He hath made Him to be sin for us." "It pleased the Father to bruise Him. He hath put Him to grief." And He, that holy One, made under the law, redeemed His children from the law and its curse and all liability to its curse, by "being made a curse" for them; as it is written, "Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree." (Gal. 3:10-13) May the Holy Ghost set this upon your hearts and my heart with such life, light, and power as that we may gaze on this poor, broken-hearted Man, who was made under the law, and was put to grief and shame and death; and be filled with wonder, love, and contrition.

And the Scriptures instruct us further in this, that this Man crucified, voluntarily gave up the ghost, that no man took His life from Him. (John 10:17,18) They attempted it, did it in their minds and hearts, did everything that was calculated to effect that purpose, in crucifying Him. But when this blessed One, the Lord of life, being crucified, knew in Himself that all things were now accomplished, that the wrath of God to the uttermost had been poured out upon Him and endured, and the curse of the law fully, fully exhausted by His sufferings, He gave up the ghost, dismissed His spirit, entered into Paradise, to be followed in a few hours by the dying thief, to

whom He gave the blessing of eternal life. The voluntary nature of the death of Christ is essential to its acceptance by the Father, to the satisfaction of the law, to the removal of death. No offering could be accepted unless offered with a willing heart. (Lev. 1:3) The Scripture instructs us further, that the law took effect upon His body as well as upon His soul. It claimed the Man, the whole human nature, and received satisfaction to its claims. The Lord Jesus was buried. Ah, what a perfume He left in the grave! What a light of eternal blessedness He left there! What a removal of its horrors the burial of Jesus effected! And further, we are told that He rose again from the dead, according to the Scriptures. "These things are written from our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." (Rom. 15:4)

And again, we are told of His Priesthood. A vital matter for sinners who are separated from God! An essential matter for those who are to come to God, that there should be for them a High Priest who should enter into the Holy of holies on their behalf; should take His own precious blood there, and should have with Him such a cloud of effectual incense in the golden censer as to make their prayers acceptable to God, as thus offered to Him. This Priesthood of Jesus Christ is powerful when realized; for He is able, as a Priest, "to have compassion on the ignorant and on them that are out of the way." And further, that He "ever liveth to make intercession" for all that come unto God by Him, and that therefore "He is able to save them to the uttermost." (Heb. 7:25)

And so through the whole gospel this wondrous Person is exalted. Exalted as a Prophet to reveal His Father's will, to teach His children what His Father is, what He is as a Father, as a God to whom they may go, as a God to forgive sinners, who blots out iniquities. He came to say the things which He had heard His Father say, and do the things which He had seen His Father do; to declare the Name of His Father in the church, and to preach His Father's righteousness. He came thus to be a Prophet to His children, and He is a Prophet to them, He does teach them. He teaches them how to walk by faith, faith in God: "Ye believe in God;" how to walk by faith in Himself: "Believe also in Me;" and directs their hearts to heaven when they are weary of earth, weary of sin, weary of self, and wondering what will become of them. He directs their hearts to heaven, and tells them what He has gone there to do for them; and that, having gone to prepare a place for them, He will come again and receive them unto Himself.

We are informed in the Scriptures too that He is a King: "I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion," (Ps. 2:6)--that He is King over the affections of His people, ruling in Zion, that King whose scepter is universal, to rule for them, to rule on their behalf, to see them well through their difficulties, to fight their battles, and to bring them to be kings and priests with Himself in eternal glory.

Also the Scriptures teach us concerning the Person and work of God the Holy Ghost; that there is in the Godhead this divine Person equal with the Father and the Son, the Holy Ghost, whose office it was first to anoint Jesus, then through and from Him to anoint every blood-bought sinner; to reveal Jesus Christ, to glorify Him in the soul, to take of His things, His Person, and His work of redemption, and His eternal love, and His goodness, and show them to poor mourners for their comfort; to dry weeping eyes by these very truths; to heal wounded souls by these very truths; and to bring beggars from the dust, and the poor from the dunghill, to sit with princes, even the princes of God's children. We are instructed in these things, and Luke, inspired

by the Holy Ghost, wrote this Gospel that it might be to the end of time for the instruction of the saints, and to confirm them in the truths in which they have been instructed.

And here let me remark, what a good thing, what a mercy it is, for us who profess the gospel, to believe in inspiration; and believing in inspiration, to read with diligence, care, prayer, and love, the blessed Scriptures of truth. All the gracious experience of a saint is grounded on the truth as it is revealed in the Scriptures. And well were it for us to be more diligent in our search into this Book, looking to see, if haply God will so favour us, what promises there may be for us, what doctrines there are for our instruction, what a covenant there is for our salvation, what a Redeemer there is to bring us to God, what a King there is to fight our battles, what a God there is to take care of us. Bear with this exhortation. Read diligently the Scriptures. You may say, "I cannot understand them." God can open them to you. You may say, "If they are only the letter, they do me no good." You do not know what use God may make of them when you are reading them. You say, "I need the instruction of the Spirit or I can understand nothing." That is true, but do read the Scriptures, for God speaks by them. Abraham's servant said, "I being in the way, the Lord met with me, and led me to the house of my master's brethren." And may not one accommodate that to this point and say, you know not how and when God may meet with you, when you are in the way? (Gen. 24:27) As it is said to Joshua, that he should meditate in the Law night and day; (Joshua 1:8) his eyes, so to speak, were to be in it. And the psalmist continually says in the 119 Psalm, that the Word of God was his delight, his meditation; that he had taken it to him as a heritage for ever.

Now I have to notice the certainty of these things; and their certainty as written in the Scriptures; that they are really sure as Peter says: "We have not followed cunningly devised fables when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His Majesty." (2 Pet. 1:16) The eleven apostles were chosen that they might declare the things which they had seen and tasted and handled of the Word of life. And Paul was called to be an apostle later; and having seen the Lord, laboured more abundantly than all the other apostles, (1 Cor. 15:8-10) bearing the name of Christ and His gospel "before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel." (Acts 9:15) They had seen all the things of which they wrote; and having seen and heard them, certain of them were inspired to write them down for our instruction. "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." There is a certainty in the testimony of the Scriptures. The prophets and apostles declare the whole counsel of God. This Book is infallible, given by inspiration of God. Its contents are true, certain; there is no uncertainty in them, no frailty of human error in them. If we had the autographs, and could read them, we could not be more certain that there is no error in the holy Scriptures. The apostle writing to Timothy tells him that from a child he had known the Scriptures, which were able to make him wise unto salvation. (2 Tim. 3:15) Ordinarily you find the experiences of the saints more or less distinctly to be connected with the Scriptures--some words are made over to them. The Word of God is a pure Word. It has been tried, tried by the devil, tried by man's contradiction of it, tried by various providences, tried in various ways; but it has always stood, and it will stand to the very end. There is no part of the Scriptures independent of the other parts. The different Books, written during generations, stretching over long tracks of time, are just one blessed Book; and may we be thankful that we have it, may we use it with reverence, prayer, and the fear of the blessed God in

our hearts. And it will be a mercy if, knowing it in the form, we are led to understand it in the spirit.

Now Theophilus had been instructed in these things, he had heard of them before; but Luke, caring for him, was inspired by the Spirit to write this Gospel for his confirmation. The thing is certain, the matters are true, the Scriptures are infallible. Take not, for instance, before I pass on, the resurrection of Christ. It is said, "How do we know it?" In the first place we know it by this Book; because witnesses to whom Jesus showed Himself alive after His passion have written and given testimony to what they saw, testified that He showed Himself to them; that He said, "Behold Me, see My hands, handle Me. A spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see Me have." (Luke 24:39) They testified of Him. He came on the sea shore to those disciples who were fishing, invincibly drew them by His influence to the shore, and said to them. "Come and dine." (John 21:12) He had prepared a dinner for them. He showed Himself on one occasion to over 500 brethren at one time. Earlier, when the disciples were in an upper room, the door being shut for fear of the Jews, into their midst came and stood this Jesus, and said, "I am not a spirit; handle Me and see." That Jesus they had forsaken, that Jesus they saw crucified, stood in their midst. To Thomas, who had declared his infidelity in the matter, He said, "Thomas, reach hither thy finger, and behold My hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into My side; and be not faithless, but believing." (John 20:27) And he saw, and believed. To the apostle Paul He appeared, so that when his authority as an apostle was questioned, he said to the questioners, "Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?" We may say the same in our manner and measure; but he said it then as an apostle, an eye-witness. Jesus appeared to him; he saw that blessed Man, he heard His voice; and it was not possible to write all the things he saw and heard. To this great and wonderful truth of the resurrection of Christ there can be no further testimony needed than that which is given by the twelve apostles, written by the Evangelists, and in the Epistles. This is the certainty of the things we believe. In believing these things we believe in truths, not imaginations, not fables, not cunningly devised fables. We believe in truths which are as certain in the Bible as it is certain that we are sitting in this chapel; as it is certain that you are hearing my voice, that you see my person. It is not more true that we are here than it is true, on the testimony of God's own true servants inspired to write, that the resurrection of Christ is a truth, redemption is a truth, salvation is a truth, justification is a truth, and that heaven made and reserved for the saints is a truth.

Now in the second place I would speak a little to this great point, that these things, with an interest in them, are made certain to certain people. These very people are made to know that they have an interest in these truths, and it is brought to pass by the Holy Ghost. But, if I may so say, He does not supplement the Bible, but opens and applies it; does not give a revelation in a man's heart that is not in this sacred Book. Beware of fancies, beware of dreams, of things that are not fully corroborated by the Scriptures; beware of any experience that you will not find within this Book, expressed in the language of the Holy Spirit. For God who honours this Word, will never honour a contradiction of it. But now, how do we know that these things are certain, and that we have an interest in them? How may the children of God come to such certainty--nay, many of them have been brought to it--that they will brave the fire, face the block, lay down their lives for the truths they have received, loving "not their lives unto the death?" Why, by the Holy Spirit attending the Word with power.

One says, and how sweet it is to say with him,

"That Christ is God I can avouch,
And for His people cares,
Since I have pray'd to Him as such,
And He has heard my prayers."

There is a blessed sense in which a child of God says to Christ what Nathaniel said to Him, "Thou art the Son of God." (John 1:49) And if you ask him why he believes it, he will give you two answers in one. First, that he believes it because the Scriptures teach it: "To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself;" (2 Cor. 5:19) and secondly, because by faith he has seen the Lord. Newton has it in another form:

"I saw one hanging on a tree
In agonies and blood."

And it is a sure thing. It is one of the sure mercies of David, that the Holy Ghost brings that truth to sinners. You have it in Zechariah: "I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplications; and they shall look upon Me whom they have pierced." (Zech. 12:10) They shall see it without a doubt. This assurance may be lost for a time, and doubts as to their interest fill them with fear, but they shall see this sight: "We saw Him by faith." It is written that God hears prayer, and that is certain. How do you know it? Because the Bible says it. How do you know it? "Because," you say, "I have had answers." Another says, "Because my conscience has been purged from dead works to serve the living God, by the blood of Christ." (John 9:14) It is written, "Sin shall not have dominion over you, for ye are not under the law, but under grace;" (Rom. 6:14) do you believe that is true of a child of God? Why do you believe it? "Because it is written," you say; "there it is, who can doubt it?" You may say further, "I know it to be true, I am certified of it." Why? "Because I was under the power of some sin, a darling lust overcame me; many and many a time I was carried away of a wrong spirit. Enmity, rebellion, hardness of heart, proud reasoning, and a variety of things overcame me; but on a day I got sight of Him who suffered on Calvary's tree, and that broke the power of all my sins, and gave me liberty."

"That thou mightest know the certainty of the things wherein thou hast been instructed." Solomon wrote to his son, and he said he did it for this, that his son might "know the certainty of the words of truth." So here there is a blessed way, a double way, if I may so speak, yet only one way in the end, whereby men of God do know the certainty of the things wherein they have been instructed. It is a sweet way; and moreover, it is such a way as puts the very image of the things which are known to be certain, upon the soul. You might easily by careful study acquire a very considerable and critical knowledge of the Bible; and being persuaded of inspiration, talk a good deal about its subjects. But there is one way only in which the truths of the Scriptures have an effect upon the soul, conscience, will, and affections, and therefore upon the life of a person. A lifelong study will not bring it. It is a bright inshining in the soul, too mysterious to be explained, too intimate to be doubted when you get it. It is expressed by the apostle: "We all with open face, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." (2 Cor. 3:18) That will do it, change your very spirit

and conscience and will and understanding and affections, put on them, as it were, the stamp and imprint of the truth. As when you melt wax, and impress the seal upon it, what is on the seal is also on the wax: so God puts His very truth at times into the consciences and spirits of His dear children.

One word more. We read of promises, of sweet promises, great promises, sure promises: "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee." (Heb. 13:5) "I will be their God, and they shall be My people." (Heb. 8:10) "Bread shall be given thee, and thy water shall be sure." (Isa. 33:16) "Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it." (Ps. 81:10) And people say, "Beautiful words, exceeding great and precious promises!" (2 Pet. 1:4) Yes, true. But how do we know them to be certain? Because they are written. "For ever, O Lord, Thy word is settled in heaven." (Ps. 119:89) "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away." (Matthew 24:35) Whoever disbelieves it, it makes no matter; whoever questions and denies it, it makes no difference. Here it is, God says it. But how do you know it for yourself? There is a way, not whereby a man will know something that the Bible does not teach him, but a way whereby that which the Bible teaches him, is true to him, true in him; and that is, when the Lord makes over a promise to him. It comes, it lodges, it lives in him, it talks to him; it says, "Fear not, God will help you." It says, when he is looking at his empty barrel, his failing cruse, "Fear not, He who made the world will make the handful of meal the drop of oil enough for you." When he is looking at his enemies and feeling their power, and is ready to faint, and says, "This will overcome me, I am afraid this will give me a sore fall and break my bones and leave me in darkness;" the promise will say, "The battle is the Lord's."

"To trust Him endeavour,
The work is His own;
He makes the believer,
And gives him his crown."

Yea, the promise is, "I will deliver thee." "Call upon Me in the day of trouble, I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me." (Ps. 50:15) And often the believer may say, "That is true; I know it certainly." How do you know it? "Well, I was in trouble, I called upon the Lord in the day of my calamity and my distress, and He sent from above, He took me out of many waters. He delivered me, and I glorified Him, I blessed Him, I praised Him, I crowned Him, I blessed Him, I loved Him, I trusted Him, and felt that my whole soul honoured Him." That is the way. "That thou mightest know the certainty of the things--those things wherein thou hast been instructed."

May the Lord open the Scriptures to us, give us to value them highly, help us to store our minds with them, but not to depend on that storing; then give us, not only to believe that this Book is infallible, but to go further, and seek and receive such demonstration of the Spirit and of power in our hearts, by the Holy Ghost, as will make us say, "Now know we that the Lord saveth His anointed." Amen.