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WEEK ONE

Unexplainable
BEGINNINGS

WEEK 1 | DAY 1

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

LUKE 1:1-4

Luke is hands down my favorite New Testament author. Paul describes Luke as “the beloved physician” (Col. 4:14). Luke’s scientific mind leaves him presenting the facts logically and articulately. His compassion, as one who cares for the sick, bursts through his writing as he paints his characters in living color, full of emotion.

Maybe it’s because I feel like I “get him.” I live with a “Luke” of my own. I’ve been married to a physician for over twenty years. Like Luke, my husband, Jonathan, applauds logic and facts, is extremely detail-oriented, and he is compassionate. He has a heart for the suffering and the downcast. His profession of assessing patients and diagnosing them day in and day out causes him to look beyond the surface and, to discover the heart of an individual, the emotional and spiritual covered by the physical. This is Luke’s writing style. He invites us to examine Jesus, not just on the surface, but more deeply—to discover how unexplainable He truly is.

In fact, Luke spent years of his life preparing for this work. He traveled the known world interviewing eyewitnesses of Jesus’ miracles and teachings. He collected every written work he could find, checking and cross-checking the accounts, comparing them with those he had interviewed. These journeys no doubt came at great personal cost to himself along with tremendous risk. He had been with Paul in Jerusalem during his arrest (Acts 21:17–36). Later he visited Paul during his imprisonment in Caesarea Philippi. He was shipwrecked with Paul on the way to Rome and was one of few companions during his last imprisonment there (Acts 24:23, 27:1–28:1; 2 Tim. 4:11). (Most scholars think Luke was with Paul from Acts 20 to the end of the narrative because of Luke’s repeated usage of the pronouns *us/we*—see Acts 20:5–7, 13; 21:1, 7, 15, etc.)

Luke’s investigation and presentation of the facts about Jesus were not compiled in the palatial library in Ephesus. They were formed in prison cells, ships tossing

on the open sea, and long, dusty roads of travel between Galilee, Jerusalem, and Judea. The development of his books, Luke and Acts, took at least a decade. Some could say they were his legacy. His crowning achievement written for the glory of his Savior: our unexplainable Jesus.

Read aloud Luke 1:1–4.

According to Luke, how prolific were the writings about Jesus at this time?

What word does Luke use to describe his account of Jesus' life and work (see especially v. 3)?

What was his overarching purpose in writing his account?

The other gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and John, wrote their gospel accounts out of their own personal experiences. They were eyewitnesses of Jesus' life and work. Matthew and John were His disciples. Mark, also known as John Mark, was a young man during Jesus' life and ministry. His mother had been a devout follower of Jesus and often opened her home in Jerusalem for gatherings of the believers. Their accounts are more biographical in nature, emphasizing different aspects of Jesus' life and teachings. Luke's purpose is more apologetic in nature: "I have taken painstaking measures to ensure you that you indeed hold a reasonable faith. Jesus clearly is the Christ, the promised Messiah, God in human flesh, the Savior of the World" (paraphrasing Luke 1:1–4).

The cultural and historical context during the time Luke constructed his Gospel sheds light on the imminent need for an accurate historical document that would outline the life of Jesus. Several events were happening. First, being nearly thirty

years after Jesus' death, many of the eyewitnesses were aging and nearing the end of their lives. James, John's brother, had already been beheaded by Herod, and Peter had been forced to flee Jerusalem. The earthly time left for many of these eyewitnesses was short.

Second, anti-Semitism was escalating in the Roman Empire. The Jews had been expelled from Rome under the Emperor Claudius, and their desire to rebel against Rome was rising. With tensions mounting, who knew how much longer it would be until Jesus' prediction regarding the destruction of Jerusalem might take place? Diligent investigative research was predicated on a peaceful climate in which one was free to travel, gathering needed information and interviewing key people. Furthermore, the ancient orators who held these stories and miracles within their hearts and minds predominantly resided in Palestine. What would happen if this city were decimated by the Romans? Who would be left to pass the stories down to the next generation?

How many of these factors resonated in the forefront of Luke's mind we do not know, but the apostolic age was rapidly coming to a close. And unless an accurate, historical, comprehensive account of the life of Jesus was faithfully preserved, the great message of the gospel was in danger of not being spread, as Jesus had commanded.

Let's take that last statement and make it more personal. Fill in your own statement with your action plan.

Unless I _____,
the message of Jesus might not be spread.

Don't generalize. Be specific. Luke expended great effort researching and writing to keep the message of Jesus from dying out. Maybe you're not even sure what the message of Jesus is yet. Maybe that's why you picked up this book—you're still trying to figure Him out. Well, Luke's gospel is a great place to start! Or maybe

you've known Him as your Savior for years, but you've become complacent or less than awestruck of all He has done for you.

Let's pause here and set the record straight in our own line of thinking for a moment. How would you describe Jesus using your own modern-day language and logic?

How confident are you that the Christian faith is indeed a reasonable one? Why do you feel as you do?

As you make your way through Luke's gospel, studying the essence, heart, and works of Jesus Christ, what do you hope to gain?

I may not know all the reasons why you have come to this study book, but this much I do know: Jesus' heart is to reveal Himself to you. His desire is that you know Him, believe Him, and experience the love, peace, joy, and purpose that He longs to give you. He is the one and only. He is both human and divine—God among us. He is unexplainable, because there is no one like Him, nor will there ever be another. And as you open up the gospel of Luke, He bids you, “Come, follow Me!”

WEEK 1 | DAY 2

UNEXPLAINABLE BEGINNINGS

LUKE 1:5-15

Here begins Luke's historical documentary. It is no wonder then that Luke opens the beginning of the story with the mention of Herod, allowing Theophilus, along with every other reader, to know the exact time frame for the opening scene. Herod is not the primary character in this opening scene, however. It is a devout couple going about their everyday lives, doing their everyday duties, when suddenly God sweeps in and does the unexplainable.

Read aloud Luke 1:5-9.

Who are the main characters in this part of the story, and what is their occupation(s)?

How is their character described?

What is their problem?

What special privilege was Zechariah chosen to do at this time?

During the reign of King David there were twenty-four priestly divisions. Abijah was the head of one of them. There were many more priests than were needed for the care and maintenance of the temple, so King David set up a system where the

priests from the different divisions would take turns serving at the temple. When it was not their turn, they would return home to their surrounding villages. Only the chief priests permanently resided within Jerusalem.

Zechariah was serving one of his two-week stints in the temple. While he was there he was chosen by lot, as was the custom instituted by King David, to go into the inner court to burn incense. This was a section of the temple, also called the Holy Place, in which only priests were allowed to enter for specified service. With sixteen to twenty thousand priests in Israel, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The incense was offered in conjunction with the morning and evening sacrifices and hours of prayer.

At this time in Israel, barrenness was thought to be a punishment from God upon women. Men were allowed to divorce their barren wives in order to preserve their family line. Yet here we have Zechariah faithfully remaining by Elizabeth's side despite their childlessness, both of them steadfastly serving God despite their sorrow. In the midst of their daily routine, God is ready to sweep in and do the dramatic.

Read aloud Luke 1:11–15.

Who appeared to Zechariah, and how did he respond?

What four things did the messenger tell him in v. 13?

How did he describe John, the child who would be born?

I can't help but imagine Zechariah entering the Holy Place with a reverent fear to begin with. This likely could have been his first time inside this hallowed sanctuary.

The awe of the presence of the Almighty just beyond the veil in the Holy of Holies must have gripped him with wonder. The Holy of Holies held the Ark of the Covenant and above this ark, God's glory dwelt. This section of the temple was only entered once a year by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, after an intense ritual of ceremonial cleansing and appropriate sacrificial offerings. Within a few feet of where Zechariah stood, the glory of the Almighty rested. Usually the priest would place the incense in the bowls and immediately exit. Not Zechariah. He had a message directly from the Almighty: his prayer has been heard.

Don't you wonder what Zechariah's prayer had been? As a representative of the people of Israel and a devout and upright man, surely his prayers went beyond his own selfish interests. Was it the coming of the Messiah? The repentance of his people before a holy God? Comfort for his wife in her grief and shame?

Herein we see the beauty of God. Within the grand story of the great redemption of the earth through the coming Messiah, we also see the tender mercy of God answering a man's innermost prayer. Could it be that Zechariah outwardly prayed for his people and God's promises to be fulfilled and only inwardly yearned for a child? Yet, God heard this unspoken desire of his heart and in His marvelous way, He answered all prayers through the miraculous birth of one life: John.

John, whose name means "the Lord is gracious."

Do you have inner desires within your heart that you have never openly expressed to God?

Or maybe you expressed them to Him long ago, but have since quit asking Him, thinking the time has passed for Him to answer?

What does the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth teach us about God's timing?

What does it mean to you in this moment to be affirmed that God hears your prayer?

Zechariah was faithful, yet he still doubted. But God answered his prayer. In His time. In His way. How often it seems that the story of Zechariah repeats itself throughout the pages of Scripture. People faithfully going about their lives, doing their duty, following God day in and day out and then God suddenly comes in and invites them to do something unexplainable.

Elisha dutifully tending his father's farm and Elijah shows up and throws his prophetic mantle upon him.

Timothy honoring his mother, serving in the local synagogue and Paul comes to town, making him a missionary.

James and John tending nets in their father's fishing boat and Jesus says, "Come! Follow Me!"

Ruth honoring her mother-in-law and becoming the great-grandmother of the great King David of Israel.

Esther, growing and learning under her cousin Mordecai, becomes queen of Persia, saving her people from an evil plot.

Zechariah and Elizabeth devoutly serving God in Judea, visited by an angel, and told they would parent a mighty prophet.

I call these encounters Kingdom Interruptions. God interrupts this everyday life to do something unexplainable.

Now it's your turn:

_____, daily _____
(your name) (your predominant activities)

What might your kingdom interruption be?

Could it be a vocation like Elisha and Timothy?

Could it be a volunteer position or a cause like James and John?

Could it be a biological legacy like Ruth and Elizabeth?

Could it be something you would never choose for yourself, but God will call you to as He did Esther?

Could it be that hidden yearning in your heart?

God has heard your prayer, dear one. Do not be afraid. Maybe you'd like to pour out some of your emotions below.

A large, empty rectangular box with decorative flourishes in the top-left and bottom-right corners, intended for writing.

WEEK 1 | DAY 3

THE SPIRIT OF ELIJAH AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD

LUKE 1:16-38

I wonder how Zechariah felt regarding the words the angel was speaking. It would be almost too much to take in, wouldn't it? We adopted our son the day he was born, and he was quite ill from the start. He had to stay in the hospital the first week of his life while the doctors ran test after test. The first night after his birth was horrific. He seized and screamed until he fell asleep for two minutes and then it would begin all over again. The nurses told me the only thing I could do was swaddle him as tightly as I could and clutch him securely to my chest. By the morning my arms throbbed and my heart was broken. My saving grace was the presence of my mother-in-law by our side. A nurse for over twenty years, she was the calming presence I needed to not lose it in rage that others' choices would cause him such harm. How long would this last?

The following night I went home to be with our daughter, and my husband stayed with his mom and our son. I feared how the night would unfold. All I could do was pray. The next morning my mother-in-law called and told me how they had the most amazing nurse that night. Her name was Christina. She said she worked with babies like our Nathan all the time and seemed to know exactly what to do. She was able to calm him down and get him to sleep for more than just a couple of minutes at a time. I got in the car and drove to the hospital eager to meet her.

When I laid eyes on Christina, she was not at all what I had expected. She had long gray hair, kind of frizzy, parted in the middle, and wore all-white scrubs, which was a bit odd for a labor and delivery nurse. There was nothing beautiful about her appearance, but her eyes were pools of the purest blue, and I felt as though I could drown in the peace they reflected. She smiled faintly at me and took my hand. She

began to speak words over my son that I can scarcely remember as I was in such awe over her presence and the entire event unfolding around me.

What I do remember is that she said he was a strong child and he would overcome this rough beginning. He had a curious mind, and much wisdom would be required in raising him. I remember staring at her thinking, “How can you know this about a child not even forty-eight hours old?” Then she squeezed my hand, took Nathan out of my arms, kissed his forehead, whispered something over him I could not hear, handed him back to me, and left.

That afternoon when Nathan was out for further testing, I went down to the gift shop to buy Christina a card. I wanted her to know how grateful I was for her kindness and that I knew she had been sent by God. I wrote on the card and came back upstairs to the nurse’s station. I asked one of the nurses to please give the card to Christina the next time she was on duty. The nurse looked back at me clearly confused. “We don’t have a nurse here named Christina,” she said. “Yes,” I insisted, “She was our nurse last night. She told us she doesn’t normally work here, but she happened to be here last night.”

“Honey, your nurse last night was Jenny,” she replied. “I have no idea who you’re talking about!”

I walked away amazed. Who was she? Was the nurse mistaken? Was she an angel? Was she from another part of the hospital? I have no definitive answers, but I do know she was sent by God to minister to our family. But the whole thing was so wild, I could hardly take it all in. How I wish I had written down every word she had said! How I cling to what little I can remember when we still fight battles from the residual effects of his prenatal development. How beautiful that God, in His sovereign wisdom, allowed Zechariah to remember every word spoken by this angel!

Read aloud Luke 1:16–25.

What did the angel say John would do?

How did Zechariah respond?

How did the angel respond to Zechariah's question?

We learned yesterday that John would be full of the Holy Spirit from birth. He was also to be raised under the Nazirite vow, never taking any wine or fermented drink. While he was also going to be a joy and delight to them, his calling was a tough one! If you know anything about Elijah's life, you know it wasn't easy—definitely not a prophecy I'd choose for one of my children! But Elijah played a huge role in Israel's messianic story.

What do the Scriptures say in regard to Elijah's return in Malachi 4:5–6?

Read Ezekiel 3:26–27 and note the similarities between Zechariah's and Ezekiel's conditions:

Don't you find it interesting that John's parents were told about his calling before he was even born? John was going to have to be one resilient, God-fearing man to step into the sandals God had planned for him! It would be a calling full of wonders, but also much wounding—and no doubt, quite lonely.

For more on Elijah and Ezekiel and how they fit into Jewish beliefs about the Messiah, visit *Come to the Table* at www.ericawiggenhorn.com.

In my humanness, after waiting so long for a child, I would attempt to protect him from every heartache and difficulty the world would throw at him. Since he was their only son, I imagine Elizabeth and Zechariah were also tempted to try and overprotect him from any danger. But John could not be coddled; he had to be physically strong. He had to be instructed. He had to face difficult things and become courageous, depending on God and not only his parents in order to fulfill the mission God had planned for him.

The truth is that every one of us is called. Every child is called. We may not know for what, or when, or where. But we are all called to fill a purpose in God's kingdom, and we need to be prepared. We need to know the Scriptures so we know we can depend on God. We need to be ready to stand alone for God, to do hard things, to be courageous. Since we don't know what anyone's calling might entail, we ought to do our best to pour into the next generation, equipping them the best we can . . . which also means that we need to be diligent in equipping ourselves.

How do you intentionally prepare yourself to be ready for whatever God might call you to do?

If you are a grandparent, parent, aunt, older sibling, teacher, coach, volunteer worker, or mentor, how do you intentionally help prepare those coming behind you?

Now let's meet the one who is coming behind Elizabeth.

Read aloud Luke 1:26–37.

Who was Joseph's ancestor?

How did Gabriel describe Mary in the eyes of God?

What would Jesus be called?

How long would His kingdom endure?

How did Gabriel describe how this would happen?

Who did Gabriel suggest Mary go visit?

There is a lot to discover in this angelic encounter as well, but we'll save that for tomorrow. For now, pause and reflect on the peace the angel brought to Mary's troubled heart: The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid.

The Lord is with you. Yes, you!

In the waiting.

In the uncertainty.

In the disappointment.

In the loss.

In the despair.

In the betrayal.

In the fear of the future.

And with God, nothing is impossible.

WEEK 1 | DAY 4

LEAPING FOR JOY

LUKE 1:28–56

Well, Gabriel definitely wins the award for the most incredible birth announcement! I find it so interesting that when Mary asked a question for clarification she wasn't scolded the way Zechariah had been. Of course, as we mentioned, part of Zechariah's curse of silence may have served as a blessing in disguise, reminding him that the child with whom he had been entrusted needed to be raised to become a mighty servant of God. Unexplainable events surrounding his birth served this purpose. Zechariah, a priest, immersed in the Scriptures, would naturally have much more understanding of the ways of God than a poor, possibly illiterate teenager from a tiny village in Galilee. Despite her unimpressive background, Mary was a girl of great faith and courage.

Even with these characteristics, she still felt afraid. It's important to reflect on the fact that finding favor with God doesn't always equate to the absence of fear. It usually means He's calling us to the unexplainable, to something impossible apart from His power. To something beyond anything we could think, ask, imagine, or dare hope for in our lives—and that means it's going to be a little scary, and definitely outside our comfort zone or current skill set.

I'd say a virgin birth falls into those categories, wouldn't you? Who could she go to talk to about this? Well, God in His great mercy answers Mary's question . . . Go to your cousin Elizabeth. Talk to her. She will believe you. And when you begin to doubt yourself, Mary, the baby inside Elizabeth's womb will remind you what I have told you.

How did Mary respond to Gabriel in Luke 1:38?

I often wonder why God chose Mary. She probably wasn't educated. She didn't come from a priestly family. She wasn't part of the Jewish aristocracy so Jesus could get the best Hebrew education possible. We aren't told of any particular skills or giftedness she had. All we're told is that she was willing to submit to God's plan for her life, no matter how crazy or out of the box it sounded. Pregnant without being married? By God? People would assume she had committed adultery or been defiled by a Gentile merchant or Roman soldier. She would be a disgrace among her people.

I think the answer is depicted in her willingness to obey: God's will is my will.

Are you willing to surrender to God like that? Do you truly believe in your heart that God's plans for your life are better than anything you have planned for yourself?

Record your thoughts below, maybe writing out a prayer to the Lord where you're struggling . . .

So, off Mary goes to her cousin Elizabeth's house in the hill country of Judea. This was a dangerous trek in those days and would have taken several days to complete. I must say, as a mother of a young teenager, I would be a bit reluctant about allowing my daughter to go, especially if I didn't quite understand the reason why she insisted on going. And if she told me she was going to become pregnant through God's intervention, I certainly would have some concerns.

Read aloud Luke 1:39–45.

What did Elizabeth do when Mary arrived?

Write out Luke 1:45:

How encouraged Mary must have felt at this greeting! As she traveled down from Galilee, the reality of her situation surely began to sink in. What would Joseph say? Would he divorce her? Would her parents believe her? Nazareth was a small village, estimated to be anywhere from 500 to 1,500 people—her story would be the talk of the town. Her family would be shamed. Who would believe such a tale?

Mary desperately needed affirmation and encouragement from her older and wiser relative. Because Elizabeth was the wife of a priest, Mary had the opportunity to not only draw on her cousin's wisdom in life's experiences, she also had the opportunity to be encouraged while in the household of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Elizabeth knew full well what it meant to live in shame and reproach among the women in her village, as one who had been barren for so many years. She understood firsthand the pain and rejection Mary would face.

Mary needed to know she wasn't alone in this, humanly speaking. She had Elizabeth, who believed in her, accepted her, and rejoiced with her at the work of God in her life. Oh, how greatly we all need an Elizabeth, don't we?

A mentor.

A confidante.

A co-laborer in ministry, whether it is in our home or elsewhere.
Someone who believes in us when we stop believing in ourselves.

Someone who can remind us what God promised in our darkest hours.

Who has been an Elizabeth in your life?

To whom have you been an Elizabeth?

Have you ever asked God to send you an Elizabeth? Or asked Him to allow you to be an Elizabeth for someone else?

And in Elizabeth's joyful response, Mary's troubles melt away. She leaps into praise. I imagine the women hand in hand dancing around the room as Mary sings these words.

Read aloud Luke 1:46–55.

Write out the one or two verses of Mary's song that speak to you most deeply right now. Why do they do so?

The most beautiful thing about her song is that it is nearly entirely comprised of varying Scriptures that she would have been taught since childhood. What we will see as the rest of the story unfolds is how Mary's baby will be born and begin to fulfill each of these things that Mary sings about here.

WEEK 1 | DAY 5

WHAT IS THIS CHILD GOING TO BE?

LUKE 1:57–80

John is eight days old now. Zechariah's ability to speak has still not returned, but God had His reasons for the delay. No doubt he wondered when his speech would return. Would he have to wait until his son fulfilled the prophecy spoken over him by Gabriel? Zechariah's muteness served as a very visible reminder that God had chosen their son for greatness. He belonged to the Lord, and they must raise him diligently in God's ways and His truth.

Zechariah's muteness points to a bigger sign as well. For four hundred years, there had been no prophecy in Israel. Malachi was the last prophet, and since his time, Israel remained in captivity under the Persians, Greeks, and presently the Romans, receiving no word from the Lord. (For a very short span of time, following the Maccabean revolt against the Hellenistic—Greek—occupiers, Judea was independent as a Jewish state for eighty years.) Israel had also remained in captivity for four hundred years in Egypt until God sent Moses to deliver them. A new type of deliverance was coming. John would prepare the way. The years of silence were over; God was going to speak.

Read aloud Luke 1:57–66.

When was Zechariah's mouth finally opened?

What question were all of the neighbors and people of Judea asking?

We mentioned how John's name means "The Lord is gracious." Throughout the history of Israel, when God mentioned a new name for Himself, He was revealing an aspect of His character, power, or ability, as well as prophesying before His people something He was about to do on their behalf. Names were viewed as prophetic when given to people as well. John needed a new name, not an old family name, because God was ushering in a new thing through him. And what was that new thing? Freedom from the law and a new era of grace. The graciousness of God was soon to be revealed!

Once Zechariah's tongue was loosed, he became filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, offering praise up to God!

Read aloud Luke 1:67-79 and circle the things below that God was going to do (hint, it should be all but one of them!):

- Give them ability to serve Him without fear.
- Rescue them from the hand of their enemies
- Remember His covenant He had made with Abraham
- Overthrow the Romans
- Forgive their sins

Wouldn't it be something if the only time our tongues were loosed we gave praise and honor to God? In what circumstances do you find your speech most honoring to God? Write a number from 1 to 10 next to each applicable activity, with 1 being least honoring and 10 being most.

- _____ *On social media*
- _____ *Having coffee or lunch with a friend*
- _____ *Around your kitchen table with your family*
- _____ *In your small group, Sunday school class, or Bible study*
- _____ *At work or in your classroom*
- _____ *In a private conversation with your spouse/significant other*

What do you notice about your speech and your activities? Any patterns? Any changes you'd like to see happen?

Describe John's childhood according to Luke 1:80.

The desert was a place of great symbolism for the Jews. Moses had led the Israelites through the desert to achieve their deliverance. Prophecies from Isaiah 40 about preparing the way of the Lord in the desert were cited by the gospel writers (Matt. 3:3, Mark 1:2–3, John 1:23). Some devout Jews, the Essenes, moved into the desert and dedicated themselves to a greater level of purity in anticipation of His coming. Many of them were scribes, and it is from this group that we have received the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Historically we know the Essenes frequently adopted Jewish orphans. It may be that John's parents passed away before he was fully raised and as a result, he was taken in by the Essenes. We don't know exactly, but we can surmise that Luke is trying to tell us that his upbringing was atypical in some regard.

Similar to how John's life would unfold, the prophecy his father spoke over him tells more about Jesus than it does about John himself. This mighty prophet eagerly and quickly took a back seat to Jesus. He never sought followers for himself, only to point them to Christ. What a beautiful lesson that is for us today! He served as a guide to the Savior.

I love the way the Holy Spirit described the work of Jesus through Zechariah's prophecy. He would bring light, salvation, and peace. Some people insist they don't need "religion" or that all religions are "the same." I dare you to find a savior who offers these three things—light, salvation, and peace—unconditionally. And I double dare you to find a person who does not need at least one of these three things in their life to a greater degree.

What is an area of your life that feels dark to you right now?

That feels dead?

Where there is discord?

Jesus came to bring light, salvation, and peace. To you. No matter who you are or what you have done. No matter if you're the one who willingly brought the darkness, death, and discord into your life or if someone else dragged you into it. He came for you. And His light, salvation, and peace that He offers? Well, let's just say, it's unexplainable.