

The Radiant Dawn

25 DAILY BIBLE READINGS
LUKE 1-2 FOR ADVENT

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Introduction

Welcome to the joyful opening chapters of Luke's Gospel. They have always seemed to me to glow, and not only through their association with the Christmas lights that sparkle in the darkness of December. Luke presents Jesus' entry into the world as the radiant dawn of an eternal day. There's music as well as light. Jesus entered this world accompanied by songs of celebration. Since then, I'm sure these two chapters have inspired more music than any other section of the Bible. Glowing with light and ringing with music, Luke's nativity account invites us to experience the joy Jesus' birth still gives.

I've noticed that committed Christians often find December more exhausting than others, not less. Perhaps that's inevitable. The pre-Christmas build up is busy enough in the family and at work. In addition, we want to seize the many opportunities open to us for sharing and celebrating the Christmas message with others. I will be very happy if these daily notes can enable a busy Christian to experience Jesus' joy inwardly while serving him outwardly.

I have assumed that readers are already committed followers of Jesus. However, I'd like to give a word of encouragement to others. You may know for sure that you don't yet belong to Jesus. Or you might be unsure whether you do or not – perhaps never having realised that each one of us needs to make a personal response to him. I hope that you will read on. As you discover more fully what these familiar Bible

passages mean, I pray that you will believe the good news and receive Jesus' light and joy.

It is important to read the relevant passage from Luke before looking at the notes each day. Sometimes the same passage is repeated several times. It is intended that you revisit those passages in full every day, rather than skipping them and going straight to the notes. The prayers are written in the "we" / "us" form. I hope you will feel free to change that to "I" / "me" if you find that more helpful.

I first wrote these notes for Katie, my wife, in December 2017 after she discovered she had no Advent reading material at hand. Each daily reading appeared in the appropriate numbered bags that hang on our tree-shaped Advent calendar. Katie's clear and settled faith is of exactly the sort Luke wanted to instil in his dedicatee, Theophilus. I dedicate this short book to her.

O Radiant Dawn,
Splendour of eternal Light,
Sun of Justice:
come, shine on Those who dwell in
darkness and The shadow of death.

Antiphon for 21st December

Everyone expects a toddler to be wobbly on their feet, but if they still wobble in the same way as a teenager, there's a problem!

The same principle is true in the Christian life. It's no wonder new believers sometimes wobble. The problem is that too many of us remain stuck in the half-light of our early impressions of Jesus. We go on wobbling for years.

Luke wrote his account of Jesus' life to give a new believer – Theophilus – stability in his faith. It's true, “stability” doesn't sound very exciting. But actually, there is no greater treasure than a settled and clear certainty about Jesus and his Kingdom.

How did Luke intend to give Theophilus this stability? It's vital we all know the answer, because God uses the same strategy today.

First, Luke intended to give an accurate account of the events. There's no stability if we're not certain that the events of Jesus' life – his birth, death and resurrection – really happened. Luke had conducted careful research, going back to the earliest eye-witnesses. As we read his account, we can be confident that we have the facts.

Second, he intended to give a full understanding of these events and their significance. In verse 1, Luke hints that their meaning had been explained long before they took place: Jesus *fulfilled* God's promises to Israel. Luke will show how that happened in his own “orderly account” (verse 3), orderly not just because he writes the events down in the right order, but because they make sense in the light of all God's promises.

There is no time in the year when it's easier to get off balance than in the manic pre-Christmas build up. We tend to shop, party and worry like everyone else. It's possible to fall flat on our faces – spiritually that is – like the wobbling toddler.

Let Luke's accurate, ordered account of Jesus' birth guide you this Advent. I hope it helps you towards a faith that's increasingly stable and clear.

Heavenly Father, in the busiest month of the year, give us the settled stability that comes from seeing Jesus accurately, fully, clearly, and coherently. Reorder our muddled minds and capture our distracted hearts. Settle our lives on a vision of Jesus that is in keeping with his true glory. In his name. Amen.

Heaven may seem silent at times, but God is never inactive.

Throughout their long childless marriage, Zechariah and Elizabeth must have appealed repeatedly to the God they faithfully served. They experienced personally what the whole nation of Israel had known for 450 years: a silent heaven.

Four hundred and fifty years without a prophet speaking the word of God! *Was anything happening?* The faithful among the nation – like Zechariah and Elizabeth – went on hoping that God had the fulfilment of all his promises in hand. But it takes effort to pray when the answer is delayed...

It was while Zechariah, a senior priest, was praying for the people in the Temple of Jerusalem that God finally broke his silence. And the angelic message was worth the wait, because it confirmed that a longed-for promise was about to be fulfilled.

“Zechariah and Elizabeth, cancel your bowls club membership and prepare for parenthood! A son is on his way. Call him John. And the joy won’t be yours alone: your son has a mission to the whole people, one they’ve been expecting for centuries!”

With his closing words, the last Old Testament prophet, Malachi, announced the coming of a figure just like the great Elijah (Malachi 4:5). He was to bring spiritual revival to the people, to prepare them for the coming of – look at verse 17! – *the Lord God himself*. The Lord God was on his way. John was to be the Elijah-like herald.

When heaven seems silent, *know that God is still active*. His promises may seem at times to disappear from view – like a river that suddenly plunges underground. For example, it may seem to us now that Jesus has forgotten to return. But the river of his purpose is still flowing, and it always re-emerges.

Zechariah and Elizabeth teach us that we mustn't stop praying, even if heaven does seem silent. Prayer places us at the centre of the action when the silence eventually breaks.

Father God, we praise you for your promises which can never fail. Help us to hold on to them when heaven seems silent. May we never give up believing that you will do more through our prayers than we can ask or imagine. Fulfil your purposes for us and through us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

What a crashing anti-climax! God's silence was broken. Zechariah ought to have danced around the temple for joy. Instead, an old enemy reared up: the sin of unbelief.

It is sobering because it was so out of character. Zechariah had kept God's law blamelessly for years, but in this defining moment he blew it. It's like the best fielder in the team dropping the catch that would have won the game.

Verse 18 records his suspicious question: "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years." Had Zechariah forgotten that Israel's story was full of births to elderly and barren couples?

Mercifully, Gabriel struck him dumb, not dead. Still, his disobedience had significant consequences. The expectant crowd outside figured he'd seen a vision. But what was it? *Zechariah couldn't tell them.* Heaven had been silent for 450 years. Zechariah's unbelief extended the silence by nine months!

However, we also see clearly from his story that unbelief cannot ultimately stop the purpose of God. He works in spite of – and even through – Zechariah's faithless response.

Zechariah asked for certainty that Gabriel's message was true. He was given this certainty in an unexpected way: the moment he realised he couldn't talk, he had all the confirmation needed.

And God pressed on with John's miraculous conception, regardless of Zechariah's unbelief. That nine month frustration gave Zechariah

opportunity to reflect deeply on what was happening. It made the song of praise he sang when John arrived all the more powerful (Luke 1:67-79).

“See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God” (Hebrews 3:12). That is a sobering warning from a God we have every reason to trust. We must take it to heart.

Zechariah’s uncharacteristic reluctance to accept God’s word should not surprise us. We can all relate to such wavering. We may often echo the words of the man who appealed to Jesus, crying out “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24) Ask God to strengthen your faith and make you willing to trust him.

Heavenly Father, we believe, but help our unbelief. Let us never distrust your promises of salvation, provision, guidance, presence and victory. Let us never be over-awed when circumstances intimidate us. Fill us with the Holy Spirit today that by faith we may glorify you, being fully persuaded that you have power to do what you have promised. In Jesus’ name. Amen.