

“Simply superb. A genuine model of Christian devotional writing—warm, enriching, and exciting application drawn from insightful expository and theological reflection on the biblical text. Each of these brief chapters is an absolute delight to read. This is joyful Christmas-time reading for Christians of every age and experience. Very highly recommended.”

FRED ZASPEL, Executive Editor, Books At a Glance; Adjunct Professor of Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In this delightful book, Christopher Ash takes us slowly but surely through the real story of Christmas from Luke’s Gospel, reflecting with insight and warmth on its deepest meaning and enabling us to both sing and pray with greater understanding and joy. A beautiful way to prepare our hearts for Christmas.”

LEE GATISS, Director, Church Society

“Christopher Ash shows us the refreshing, startling realities that lie behind our Christmas festivities. Whether you’re familiar with the story of the birth of Jesus or yet to be convinced it has any real relevance to life today, this will make you sit up, think again, and give thanks for these events that happened so long ago. I’m going to enjoy using it.”

SAM ALLBERRY, Speaker, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries; Author, *Why Bother With Church?* and *Is God Anti-Gay?*

“Christopher Ash is a proven scholar with pastoral sensibilities. His Advent meditations will give substance to the season for you and your kin. As the world turns its attention to Christmas, even as much as it tries to cover it over with Santa and sentimentalities, it unavoidably invites Christ’s people to commend him. Let’s not blush and utter a few holiday trivialities. Let’s give details and contours. Let’s provide reasons for Christmas—which begins with feeding our own souls on the substance of the season. Open to these 24 meditations each day in December and let the fresh air of Christmas sanity return to your soul.”

DAVID MATHIS, Executive Editor, desiringGod.org; Pastor, Cities Church, Minneapolis / St. Paul, Minnesota; Author, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus Through the Spiritual Disciplines*

“Christopher Ash has put together a wonderful resource for Advent. Engaging explorations of Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus, a prayer to pray, a hymn to sing (if you dare) and room to record your own observations. We tried them around the dinner table and they worked. Recommended.”

MARK THOMPSON, Principal, Moore College

“These devotionals are digestible: they will go down easily in the busy days of Advent. They are profound: they will go down deep. Most wonderfully, they are word-filled: they will feed us with the truth and beauty of the Scriptures, and of the Savior whose advent we celebrate.”

KATHLEEN NIELSON, Author; Speaker

“A gem of a book: faithful to the text, sensitively applied, imaginatively illustrated, full of grace and wisdom, rich and deep in theology, and, most importantly, spiritually refreshing—it caused me to worship in my heart as I read.”

JOHN SAMUEL, Senior Minister, Duke Street Church,
Richmond, UK

“Christopher Ash has a gift from God of showing you clearly what is in Scripture which we so easily miss. It is no little thing to take familiar passages and handle them freshly, giving new insights into the wonder of who Jesus is. *Repeat the Sounding Joy* is full of warm, heart-searching application, terrific hymns and wonderful prayers.”

PAUL LEVY, Minister, International Presbyterian
Church Ealing, UK

“I can think of no better way to approach the Christmas season than reading the richly biblical and thoughtfully pastoral meditations in Christopher Ash’s latest book. Ash always writes with an insightful sensitivity to the joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears of Christians, and these twenty-four meditations on the opening chapters of Luke’s Gospel are no exception. The meditations unfold both the wonder and the challenge of the incarnation. Reading these brief chapters will inform and inspire. I have resolved to buy copies for my children and their families.”

IAN HAMILTON, Trustee, Banner of Truth



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INTRODUCTION

Advent is a waiting game.

From here on in, most of us have got our minds set on Christmas. The children are waiting with great anticipation—come December 1st they will be peeling back the doors on their Advent calendars as they count down to the big day. The adults are waiting too as they get ready for the great celebrations—storing up food, buying presents, sending cards, planning get-togethers. Some of us love it; others find it a stress—but we can't avoid it. It's all about Christmas.

This book is written to help you set your mind on Christmas—not the day to come in two or three weeks but that glorious night in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. I want you to come with me through the opening two chapters of Luke's Gospel, in which Luke most vibrantly and wonderfully tells us of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. Each day we will focus on one thought

from Luke's account; we will pause and meditate on that one thought. My hope is that you will arrive at the 25th of December with a heart that is thrilled by and thankful for the gift of the Lord Jesus.

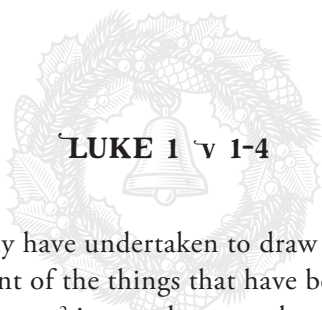
So in the coming weeks we will be thinking about Christmas; but we are not waiting for Christmas. Instead, our meditations on Christmas will shape us to wait well for something even better.

Advent is a double-edged season. We think of it as the run-up to Christmas, but when the Christian church speaks of Advent, we mean something much grittier and more substantial. The word "advent" comes from the Latin word for "coming". And the New Testament speaks of Jesus coming into the world at two separate times. First—as will be the focus of our meditation in this devotional—his coming as a baby at the first Christmas. But it also looks forward to his second Advent. When Jesus ascended into heaven in full view of his disciples, God's messengers told them that "this same Jesus ... will come back" (Acts 1 v 11).

There is much more in the New Testament about Jesus' return than there is about Christmas. You wouldn't think so if you take your Christianity from popular culture. But Jesus will come back—publicly, unmistakably, in glory and great power. Indeed, he *must* come back. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews explains, "Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are

waiting for him” (Hebrews 9 v 27-28). Now *that* is a day worth waiting for.

These meditations will help you to reclaim the double edge to the season of Advent. As we reflect on the Jesus who came as a baby all those centuries ago, let us never forget that we are waiting, longing, yearning, praying for that great day when he will return. For the Jesus whom Luke reveals to us at the start of his Gospel is “this same Jesus” who will come back in glory. The more deeply we understand him in his first Advent, the more passionately we shall long for his return, when we shall see him face to face; and the more joyfully we will celebrate his arrival at the first Christmas.



LUKE 1 v 1-4

¹ Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye witnesses and servants of the word. ³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

1 A REASSURING CERTAINTY

“Certainty” is a great word. Yet certainty is certainly hard to find.

In recent days I have come across reports of two general elections, in Sweden and Brazil, through different newsfeeds, newspapers or TV channels. It is astonishing what very different stories these sources tell, depending on the particular angle with which each wants to spin their account. Maybe you share my frustration. You want to know what actually happened, with fair reporting and balanced assessment, but somehow everyone has their own spin on things, and you flounder in a world of fake news and post-truth (as it has been called by the *Oxford English Dictionary*). If only, you say, I could find something really and certainly true.

But then, at other times we enjoy living in a fantasy world. There’s long been an appeal to losing ourselves in a good fictional story. Now technology means we can

even play a part in such a story, and walk around as an avatar in a virtual world, choosing what type of creature we are, what we wear, what powers we want to have, how we behave, what we say—and all without any real-world consequences. No wonder it's attractive!

And, to be honest, the Christmas season can feel a bit like that: a happy, cosy make-believe world of santas and elves and reindeer and *The Snowman* and *The Polar Express*—all enjoyed without even having to feel cold. Plenty of people think Christmas is a sugary fiction to make us feel better in the middle of winter—a form of extended escapism and “retail therapy”.

But it's not. At least, the Bible's Christmas isn't. Before telling us the story, Luke carefully shows us that what he is about to say is TRUE. Really true—True with a capital “T”. Lots of people have written accounts of it all. Luke calls these “the things that have been *fulfilled* among us” because everything he's going to say is a fulfilment—a filling full—of what we call the Old Testament. These things didn't happen out of nowhere. The Old Testament has shadows and outlines of what would happen, and especially of *who* would come. The story Luke tells shows how Jesus fills those outlines full. Here we will find certainty.

The stories have come to Luke from “those who from the first were eye witnesses” (v 2). They were there; they saw, they heard, they touched these things. And they were “servants of the word”; that means they didn't make it up to suit themselves; the word was the master, and they were its servants—or perhaps we should say

his servants. The apostle John writes about “that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched” (1 John 1 v 1). Here we will find certainty.

Luke has very “carefully investigated everything” right from “the beginning” (Luke 1 v 3). And now he has written an “orderly account” for a man called Theophilus (which means something like “friend of God”). The reason Luke has written is so that Theophilus—and now we too—can “know the certainty” about these things (v 4). Rock-solid reliable, True, certain.

Escapism is alright, so long as we know that’s what it is. Two of my favourite Christmas movies are *Miracle on 34th Street* and *The Preacher’s Wife*. They’re wonderful. But they’re not remotely true.

Jesus Christ is not like Santa Claus. One day each one of us will come face to face with truth, face to face with Jesus. When we die, or when Jesus returns, it will be no good trying to escape into a fictional world; it won’t pass to say, “But I like to think...” this or that about God and about Jesus. That will be a great day, but perhaps also a frightening one. Luke tells us the truth now so that we can be ready to meet with truth then.

So ask yourself: What areas of my life are so painful that I take refuge in fantasy? What doubts cloud my contentment in the truth of Jesus? Meditate today on the sureness of the truth as it is in Christ. Thank God that his message is certain, solid, reliable, true. You can rest your life on it. How wonderful to find certainty!

✠SING

*Tell me the old, old story
Of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and his glory,
Of Jesus and his love:
Tell me the story simply,
As to a little child,
For I am weak and weary,
And helpless and defiled.*

(Katherine Hankey, 1834-1911)

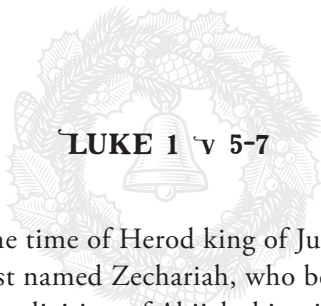
✠PRAY

Blessed Lord, who has caused all the Bible to be written for our learning, we thank you that the story we hear from Luke is true and safe and secure, and we can rest our lives and our eternal destinies upon the message we hear in it. Grant that, as we meditate quietly on this old, old story, our hearts may be comforted by the solid certainty that these things are true. May we know in some fresh way this Advent the comfort of your holy word, and embrace and hold it fast in our hearts and minds. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Repeat the Sounding Joy

JOURNAL

[illegible]



LUKE 1 v 5-7

⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶ Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷ But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.



A POIGNANT HOPE

“But they were childless.” Before we speed on to the rest of the story, let’s quietly pause at these sad words. For some, to do so will cause terrible personal pain. And all of us, perhaps, will feel keenly the sorrow of those whom we love and who are childless: those who have never married, but who would love to have married; others who are married, but for whom the birth of a child has never been given by God. Childless.

It is, as one childless couple has said, “that strange grief which has no focus for its tears and no object for its love”. There is no anniversary of childlessness on which friends might send a card of condolence, no grave to visit and remember, no photograph or name or memory of the child who never came. It is just an emptiness, a not-ness, a joy that didn’t come, a hope for ever dashed.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were married. They hoped and prayed for a child, for they valued highly such

a wonderful gift of God. But the child never came. The months went by, but there was no conception. Gradually the biological clock ticked on to the years when it seemed unlikely to happen, and finally into that stage of life when it was most definitely not going to happen. Many tears, much quiet grieving. And no hope. Childless.

Yet however painful it might be to pause here in the story, it is important to do so. For it will deepen our grasp of the nature and the wonder of the gospel of the Lord Jesus. And that depth of wonder will more than compensate for the tears we may shed.

Childlessness is a poignant motif in the story of the Bible. Abraham and Sarah are childless—until Isaac is given; Isaac and Rebecca are childless—until Esau and Jacob are born; Jacob and Rachel are childless—until Joseph is given; and there were others. And now Zechariah and Elizabeth, this godly priest and his pious wife, are added to the list.

It is clear that for none of these couples was their childlessness a punishment from God for their sin. And yet, after her son, John, is conceived, Elizabeth describes her former childlessness as a “disgrace” among her people: “‘The Lord has done this for me,’ she said. ‘In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people’” (1 v 25).

Some would have considered Elizabeth’s childlessness to be a disgrace because they thought it was a punishment from God for her sin. (The friends who come to “comfort” the Old Testament character Job in his misery

think like this.) Such people would have been wrong. Luke describes Zechariah and Elizabeth in glowing terms as profoundly righteous people who keep the law of God because they believe all the promises of God.

And yet there is a sense in which their childlessness is a “dis-grace”; for it is a peculiarly vivid example of the misery of living in a world under sin and the righteous judgment of God. Every sickness, every sadness, every disability is—in this sense—visible evidence that we live in a world under the righteous judgement of God. No doubt there are marks in your life at the moment that show you too are living in a world under judgment; we are all marked in some way with what Elizabeth calls “disgrace”.

And therefore—and this is the wonderful significance of what happens—the removal of this “disgrace” is a sign of the kindness and mercy of God, as “dis-grace” is swept away by grace. Again and again in the Bible story this is what the birth of an unexpected child means—from Isaac onwards. It is a sign of the gospel. A world with no new children would be a sad and forever ageing world, a world without hope. Every child is a sign of hope for the future, a bundle of unknown possibilities, a sign of what we call God’s “common grace”—his kindness to all humankind. And this unexpected child, John the Baptist, is a sign not just of God’s common grace to all, but specifically of God’s particular kindness in what he is about to do in the gospel of Jesus.

The conception and birth of John the Baptist does not mean that every yearning of a childless couple will

issue in a happy birth. Far from it. There have always been, and will be to the end of time, godly, prayerful couples who long for children and are not given them. None of us can know, when we get married, whether or not God will grant us this precious gift.

But we can all know that the conception and birth of John the Baptist points forward to a much greater gift. The particularly painful “dis-grace” experienced by Elizabeth and Zechariah is vividly replaced by a gift of grace. That boy will be the herald of a deeper and more wonderful grace. So whether your present experience is of sadness or joy, use today quietly to pin your hopes not upon a change in your circumstances but upon the great hope for the future to which this baby, John the Baptist, points so clearly. Think about your marks of “disgrace”; thank God that in Christ they are not a punishment for your personal sins; and rejoice that when Jesus returns, every one of those painful marks will be taken away.

☪SING

*Hark, the glad sound! The Saviour comes,
The Saviour promised long;
Let ev'ry heart prepare a throne,
And every voice a song.*

*He comes the broken heart to bind,
The bleeding soul to cure;
And with the treasures of his grace
To enrich the humble poor.*

(Philip Doddridge, 1702-1751)

PRAY

God our heavenly Father, as we grieve for the miseries of this world, and especially as we weep with those who weep in childlessness, we thank you that by the birth of John the Baptist you gave us a herald of hope: that in the new heavens and new earth all who belong to Christ will rejoice in the overwhelming goodness that will fulfil and exceed all our godly longings. Even in the midst of our tears, give us thankful hearts, we pray. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

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