



ENCOUNTER — THROUGH THE — BIBLE

RENEW YOUR MIND, ENGAGE YOUR WORLD



LUKE | JOHN

A DAILY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE THROUGH THE BIBLE

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 Scripture Union is an international Christian charity working with churches in more than 130 countries, providing resources to bring the good news about Jesus to children, young people and families and to encourage them to develop spiritually through the Bible and prayer. As well as co-ordinating a network of volunteers, staff and associates who run holidays, church-based events and school groups, we produce a wide range of publications and support those who use our resources through training programmes.

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MEETING GOD

For many years Christians throughout the world have found the 'Scripture Union method' a tremendous help in deepening their relationship with God as they read the Bible. Here is a modern version of that method, which aims to help you to make your time with God a true meeting with him. You may like to refer to it each day as a supplement to the comments in this volume.

COME TO GOD as you are. Worship him for his power, greatness and majesty. Bring him your feelings and needs. Ask for his Holy Spirit to help you understand and respond to what you read.

READ the Bible passage slowly and thoughtfully, listening out for what God is saying to you.

TALK WITH GOD about what you have read. These suggestions may help you:

- 'Lord, thank you for your Word to me today. What special message are you shouting out to me, or whispering to me, in these verses?'

- 'Lord, I want to meet you here; tell me more about yourself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in these verses.'
- 'I don't know what today holds for me, Lord. I need your guidance, your advice. I need you to help me be alert. Direct my heart and thoughts to those words you know I need.'
- 'Lord, your Word is a mirror in which I often find myself. Show me myself here, as you see me, alone or with others. Thank you that you understand how I feel as I read your Word.'
- 'Lord, there are things here I don't understand. Please help me through the notes in this guide, or give me others who may help me.'

RESPOND Try to find a key thought or phrase which has come to you from this passage to carry with you through the day. Pray for people who are on your mind at the moment. Determine to share your experiences with others.

USING THIS GUIDE

Encounter through the Bible is a devotional Bible guide that can be used any time. It uses some of the best of the *Encounter with God* Bible series to guide the reader through whole Bible books in a systematic way. As *Encounter with God*, it is designed for thinking Christians who want to interpret and apply the Bible in a way that is relevant to the problems and issues of today's world.

It is hoped that eventually the series will lead readers through the whole Bible. This volume covers Luke and John. Look out for the other guides available now:

Old Testament

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus
Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua
Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel

New Testament

Matthew, Mark

The notes are arranged in Bible book order – in this volume, Luke and John. Each Bible book series begins with an introduction giving an overview of the book and its message. These aim to help you to get a grip on the book as a whole.

Each daily note begins with a call to worship which should help you consciously come into God's presence before you read the passage. The main 'explore' section aims to bring out the riches hidden in the text. The response section at the end of the note may include prayer or worship ideas and suggest ways of applying the message to daily living.

LUKE

Luke was a doctor and this is perhaps reflected in his concern for individuals. He was a friend and colleague of Paul and joined him on some of his mission travels (see use of 'we' in Acts 20,21; Colossians 4:14). His Gospel was probably written AD 62-70. This was the first of two volumes. In part 1 he wanted to write a well-organised account of the life of Jesus which was based on good eye-witness evidence (1:1-4). Acts is the second volume, which records the beginnings and development of Christianity.

Luke seems to write especially for Gentiles and to have a particular interest in children, women and social outcasts. He demonstrates throughout his Gospel that the good news about salvation, the good news about the kingdom and the good news as seen in Jesus is for all people, perhaps especially for the poor and powerless. He reminds his readers that Jesus is the fulfilment of this prophecy of the Messiah: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me ... to proclaim good news to the poor' (Luke 4:18,19).

Outline

1 Introduction	1:1-4
2 The early days of the Saviour	1:5 - 4:13
3 The Saviour in Galilee	4:14 - 9:50
4 The Saviour goes to Jerusalem	9:51 - 19:44
5 The Saviour in Jerusalem	19:45 - 24:53

GOD WORKS OUT HIS PLAN

Lord, make me humble before you, to take the path you call me to, and to trust that your ways are best.

LUKE 1:1-25

Luke opens his Gospel by telling us of his intentions (vs 1-4). Here, he says, is something solid, reliable, carefully investigated by going back to the beginning, and thorough. He wants us to read so as to come to an assurance and certainty about our relationship with God and have a solid basis for our faith (v 4).

Luke wants to tell us how God reaches out into humanity. He begins by showing how God's plan and the role played by John the Baptist are indicators of the detailed care God took to save us. He shows us, through Zechariah and Elizabeth, how he works through ordinary people, even when their response is marked by doubt as well as devotion. Elizabeth's plight of childlessness would have brought disgrace in those times (v 25). Yet despite her personal disappointment, she faithfully serves God (v 6, no doubt taking her disappointment to him), and when her situation is changed, she doesn't forget God but rejoices in what he has done. Zechariah also teaches us about walking with God, even amid uncertainty. He rather underestimates God and responds unbelievably to his voice. It seems he needed a lesson in faith in the midst of his puzzlement.

Zechariah needed to learn that God will perform what he has promised, but in his time and his ways - which may be unexpected, even mysterious. The child to be born would play a vital role in God's purposes, and God's plan was worked out through the void in this couple's life being filled. Even the apparent random falling of the lot to Zechariah (v 9) was actually designed by God¹ not only to bring joy to this couple but also to fulfil the Old Testament promise that God would send someone to prepare Israel for a divine visitation.²

Why is it sometimes hard to trust the Lord, and believe that his ways for us are gracious and satisfying?

¹ Compare Ruth 2:3 ² Mal 3:1; 4:5,6

THE GOD OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

Blessed is the one who believes that the Lord will do what he says.¹

LUKE 1:26–56

What do you think are the really important points in these 31 verses? What do you think are the key things to notice about Mary? Sometimes popular piety has surrounded her in a haze of unreality, and she has been portrayed in ways that have little to do with the biblical text. It is clear that Jesus was conceived in her womb before sexual relations had taken place. Some people struggle to believe this, but if verse 37 is true, then we can accept it. Note how the angel explains the event: the Holy Spirit will come upon her, meaning that she will be enabled to do and be more than anything she could by herself. Then she is told that ‘the power of the Most High’ will overshadow her (v 35). If we want to see God work, we must listen for him to reveal how he does it.

Observe also how Mary responds to what she is being told. She is going to give birth to the Messiah, the one who God had promised would reign for ever, not just over Israel but over the whole world. This King would be God’s Son. And Mary’s reaction? ‘May it be to me according to your word’ (v 38). If God has promised something, he will always do what he says (v 45). Mary is available and willing to serve – basic characteristics that anyone can offer God. Mary will go where God leads, knowing that his grace will supply whatever she lacks. Mary’s hymn is a story not only about herself but about anyone who fears the Lord and is the object of his mercy and favour, as verses 50–53 in particular emphasise. When God acts, the proper response is worship and praise, belief and trust, as well as obedience.

How do we respond when God is at work among us? Are we prepared for him to act as he wants? Do we believe he will keep his word?

¹ Compare v 45

TRUSTING GOD MORE

'Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight'.¹

LUKE 1:57-66

Many of us are privileged to have been brought up in the ways of God and have benefitted from the godly influence of Christlike people. Unfortunately, this can sometimes have the effect of making us rest on our spiritual laurels. We may be steeped in the ways of the Lord, people of lifelong faith, but we still need to grow and build our relationship with God. Zechariah is such a person, a mature and pious man who still needed to learn. Sometimes God may have to deal with us if we have become complacent, and bring us up short and teach us of our need to keep moving forward in our service and knowledge of him.

Zechariah had, in effect, been brought up short by the Lord, and through his enforced silence been made to reflect and reconsider God's ways of working. God wanted to teach him that his sovereign will must be done, and while he sometimes works in surprising ways, trusting him is really the only path to take. Zechariah was learning that God brings his promise to pass in his own timing and in his own way, and he shows he has learned this by his obedience when it comes to naming his new baby (v 63). He demonstrates that even if those around him, his friends and neighbours, don't understand why he doesn't do things in the way they have normally been done (v 61), Zechariah will walk where God tells him to walk. And as he obeys, he is filled with joy and praises God for the way he has taught him.

'John' means 'God is gracious' or 'God has shown favour'. Today's verses show how God can use anyone who trusts him and wants to obey him and to know him better.

Ask the Lord to help you to reflect on where you are in your walk with him, and whether you need to grow in trust and obedience in any area.

¹ Prov 3:5, NRSV

GOD ACTS AT LAST

‘Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed are those who take refuge in him.’¹

LUKE 1:67–80

Do you ever long for God to act, to relieve some pain and problems that you are going through, to bring refreshment in the midst of stress and strain? In these verses, Zechariah comes across as someone who has considered the painful trials and expectations of the past, and now, as he looks at his new baby, his lips are filled with rejoicing that God, at last, is going to do what he promised many, many years ago. Pain and sorrow had been the lot of his countrymen over many years, but people like Zechariah had prayed and trusted for a long time. They knew that God had made a covenant with Abraham (v 73),² as well as promising to send a Messiah and a prophet to prepare the way.³ They had longed for these things to happen, and now they were all to come true.

How does Zechariah’s song strike you as you read it? Some have interpreted it as a statement of how God is going to rescue his people, not least politically. Others see it in a more directly spiritual way, showing how salvation is being brought not merely to Israel but to the whole world. We should probably avoid polarising such views, and not make such a ‘sacred/secular’ divide. That said, it seems there is a greater emphasis on God’s mercy (v 78), the forgiveness of sins (v 77), peace (v 79) and rescue from death itself (v 71), all coming about through the strong arm of God (vs 68,69). These points give a wider understanding of salvation, and show God coming to deal with the real problems of life in an all-embracing way. This is fulfilment of the promises of the Old Testament (note how full this song is of Old Testament phrases).

What areas of your life do you want God to act in? Take these to him and trust in his promises to meet your needs.

¹ Ps 34:8 ² See Gen 22:15–18 ³ Isa 9:6,7; 11:1,2; Mal 3:1; 4:5,6

THE CREATOR AS A BABY

'Our God contracted to a span, / Incomprehensibly made man.'¹ Bow in adoration!

LUKE 2:1-7

As you read these seven verses, what strikes you? What hits me is the simple, humble origins of Jesus' birth. It can be hard to appreciate who it is that is born here: the 'King of Kings and Lord of Lords'.² Most royal figures are born with great rejoicing and ceremony, but this birth is as lowly as it comes. Being placed in an animal's feeding trough, spending his first hours of human existence in a manger, is to enter this world in about as mundane a way as possible. If I was arranging the birth of the Saviour of the world, I would have organised a rather more spectacular entry!

Perhaps one of the things we see here is that God's ways are so often different to ours. The arrival of the incarnate Son of God provides a contrast between how God did it, and how we might have done it. In Luke 1, we saw how the angel said the baby would be a king of an everlasting kingdom (vs 32,33), and Zechariah rejoiced that he would be like the rising sun who gives light to guide us in the way of peace (vs 78,79). Yet this birth is so plain. The self-emptying of the Messiah, taking the form of a servant, has begun.³ Maybe we shouldn't stop at the manger, though; the birth of this baby is the start of the confrontation between the kingdom of God, in all its seeming insignificance and vulnerability, and the kingdoms of this world. This, not the Emperor Augustus, is the true King. He probably never heard of Jesus; but within a century or so, his Roman successors were trying to wipe out Jesus' followers. And 200 years after that, the Emperor himself became a Christian!

Take time to wonder at the ways of God, his faithfulness and humility, the way he brings about his plans, and his love for the human race.

¹ Charles Wesley, 1707–88, from 'Let earth and heaven combine' ² Rev 19:16
³ Phil 2:5–11

GOD USES UNLIKELY PEOPLE

Lord, help me to understand how you use people to do your will and make your ways clear to others.

LUKE 2:8–20

God often works in surprising ways and with people who seem unlikely candidates to do his will. Why do you think God chose the shepherds to be among the first to receive news about the Saviour and Messiah? Some think this indicates how God meets with the outcasts and unpopular, but that is not how shepherds would have been viewed at that time. The way shepherds appear in Scripture is usually positive, and their association with these events is more likely to indicate God's involvement not just with the prominent and great but with all people.

Further, what the angels announced to the shepherds that night is proclaimed to all humanity. As the shepherds tell everyone what has happened (v 17), and people are astonished at what they say (v 18), we sense anew that God does what he promises and involves all sorts of people in spreading his good news.

How amazing that God involves himself with us! Let us not take this for granted. Let's make sure we take time to ponder and really see who and what Jesus is all about. The praise from the armies of heaven reflects the wonder of who he is - not merely one teacher or leader among many, but the Saviour who is Christ the Lord (v 11), one who is now seated at the right hand of God, praying for us.¹ No wonder Mary kept these things in her heart, treasuring them and thinking about them often (v 19; *cf* v 51). Yet God had only just begun to reveal the way he is involved with us through Jesus. This Saviour was sent from heaven to die for us, be raised for us, and to relate to us! This is the true story of Jesus - no wonder the shepherds glorify and praise God.

Lift up your voice in praise and offer yourself in gratitude for what this birth means!

¹ Luke 22:69; Heb 7:25

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