

Advent 2020: Christmas basics...

Advent is the period leading up to Christmas. Literally, it means 'waiting'. We know that feeling—from when we were little children through to now. In those instances, it is connected to family get-togethers, food preparation, present purchasing and receiving, and holidays! However, as Advent emerged as a period in the Christian calendar, it was more importantly connected to the waiting for the promises of God to be fulfilled—that through the family of Abraham, he would roll back sin, and through the line of David, he would establish the rule of his king forever.

Each year, it is good to celebrate Advent, to remind us of what we have benefitted from, what we enjoy, and what we continue to wait for. This year, as we enjoy these few weeks of 'waiting', we are going to remind ourselves of the 'Christmas basics' - the basic account of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, the fulfilment of the promises of God. As we do so, using Luke's account, we will be reassured of the certainty of the things we have believed, as we wait for the return of this King.

Study 1: Luke 1:1-4

1. Read Luke 1:1-4.
2. What does the author recognize? (vs.1-2)

What do you think 'the events that have been fulfilled among us' means? (cf. Acts 1:1-3)

How is verse 2 encouraging, at least in its original context?

3. In light of this, what does the author reveal about his piece of writing in verse 3?

What does the author reveal about his methods and writing technique?

4. Who is the recipient of this writing, in verse 3?

How is the recipient addressed? Do Acts 23:26, 24:3, 26:25 help us understand a little more about who this man might be?

Why is the message of the angels so important?

Why is the reaction of the shepherds so important?

In many ways, on the surface, this is a surprising birth narrative. However, it is reassuring for a number of reasons... First, the historically-verifiable details are crucial, especially if Theophilus is a Roman public servant—he can check all these. Second, it shows continual fulfilment of prophecy and prediction. Third, it accords with the plans of God revealed in the Old Testament. Fourth, it sits truthfully within the framework of Mary's song and Zechariah's song.

6. As you enjoy Christmas this year, what have you been reminded of from Luke's careful account?

As you enjoy Christmas this year, what have you learned from Luke's careful account?

As you enjoy Christmas this year, what have you been reassured of from Luke's careful account?

Study 5: Luke 2:1-20

1. Read Luke 2:1-20
2. When you look at verses 1-3, what strikes you as reassuring in the way Luke has written? Why might this be reassuring for a man like Theophilus?
3. When you look at verses 4-5, what strikes you as reassuring in Luke's writing, especially against the backdrop of Luke 1:30-35, and Old Testament passages like 2 Samuel 7?

Why might this be reassuring for Theophilus?

4. What happens in verses 6-7?

Why is this reassuring, against the backdrop of Luke 1:26-38?

5. Look at verses 8-20... What do you find surprising about this section?

What do you find reassuring?

4. What is the purpose of this carefully investigated, orderly account, in verse 4?

Luke is understood to be the author of 'Luke-Acts', a double-volume work about the life/work of Jesus, and the continuation of his work in the early church. He wrote for Theophilus who, I think, is a middle-ranking Roman public servant. Luke wrote to assure Theophilus of 'the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed'. In this sense, this is history with a purpose (which all history is!): to persuade Theophilus of the certainty of Jesus and what he lived, and accomplished, as 'fulfilment'.

5. Pulling some of these threads together, what similarities might you see between Theophilus and you?

How might the account Luke has written about the birth of Jesus help you at this time of the year?

How might you be able to use the reassurance you will receive in reading this account to share the good news with others this year?

Study 2: Luke 1:5-38

1. Read Luke 1:5-38.
2. Taking a bird's eye view, how does this passage divide into two parts?

What are the similarities between the two?

What are the differences between the two?

3. Looking at verses 5-25, write down all the historical detail that could have been verified by Theophilus...

What do we learn about the parents-to-be...?

What do we learn about the child-to-be... ?

What do we learn about the God behind these events... ?

4. Looking at verses 23-38, write down all the historical detail that could have been verified by Theophilus...

This is a remarkable birth narrative—one of the most remarkable in the Bible (and that is saying something!). The way in which it is written places it firmly within the narrative of the whole of God's promise unfolding—and there are witnesses too!

5. What do you find reassuring in this fulfillment birth narrative? Why?

How could you share this reassurance this week with someone who does not know Jesus?

Study 4: Luke 1:57-80

1. Read Luke 1:57-80.
2. Read through the account of John's birth again. Write down all the verifiable historical details...

In what ways was the birth of John a fulfilment of what Gabriel had stated earlier in Luke...

3. How does Zechariah respond, in verse 67?
4. Read through the prophecy. What is his main point?

What is the foundation—Biblically, historically—for his prophecy?

What role is prophesied for John? (vs.76ff)

What does John's role look forward to? (vs.76ff)

What do we learn about the parents-to-be...?

What do we learn about the child-to-be... ?

What do we learn about the God behind these events... ?

These parallel passages are meant to sit side-by-side, showing the intervention of God to fulfil his promises to roll back sin and bring blessing. They are interwoven with Old Testament allusions (vs.32-33 connect to the promises in Genesis 49:10, 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 2!).

5. How do you think someone like Theophilus might find these verses reassuring about 'the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed'?

How might you find these reassuring as you continue to wait now?

How might you be able to talk of this certainty this week, with those who don't know Jesus?

Study 3: Luke 1:39-56

1. Read Luke 1:39-56.
2. Why do you think Mary makes the journey to see Elizabeth?

Why would this be reassuring for Theophilus?

What greeting does Mary receive?

Why would this be reassuring for Theophilus?

3. Read Mary's song again... (vs.46-56)

What is its key idea? What does it tell us about God? What does it tell us about Mary?

Why would this be reassuring for Theophilus?

4. Why is verse 56 important?

Why would this be reassuring for Theophilus?

In many ways, this is a 'hinge', between the birth predictions about John and Jesus, and the birth narratives. In this sense, it is a section of reassurance—what the angel has stated is proven true, both factually and emotionally.

5. Why would Theophilus find this whole section a reassurance?

Why would it reassure us?