

For 75 years, God has worked in and through the ministry of IFES, enabling people to know and serve him. How appropriate that, in celebration, David J Montgomery has produced an excellent devotional on Luke and Acts. Like the ministry of IFES, this devotional centres on Jesus and his ongoing work. IFES insiders and strangers alike will be blessed by insights from Scripture, stories from students, and prayers from global IFES staff.

WALTER KIM

PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF EVANGELICALS

The deepest, truest learning is always over the shoulder and through the heart. In *The Unfinished Story* we are graced to learn from a wise, practised teacher of Scripture with a lifelong love for students. Through a month of reflections that weave together biblical text with prayers and psalms, David J Montgomery draws us into the story of those whose encounter with Jesus was ‘a taster of the kingdom to come’, inviting us into a way of reading the Bible that is, at one and the same time, ‘for me, to me, about me, from me, and within me’ – which is as it should be, as we engage Luke’s story, a story which is the heart of the gospel that continues to be written in every century and every culture.

STEVEN GARBER

SENIOR FELLOW FOR VOCATION AND THE COMMON GOOD, MJ MURDOCK CHARITABLE TRUST, AND AUTHOR OF VISIONS OF VOCATION: COMMON GRACE FOR THE COMMON GOOD

It was with great joy that I read the book that my colleague and friend Monty has prepared. His way of writing and presenting these devotionals is very special. First, because they follow the good tradition of Scripture Engagement in IFES, where the main point is to invite us to a personal encounter with the Lord through the Scriptures. Going through Luke and Acts, reflecting on these selected passages, connecting with the reality of the student work through the beautiful stories shared and with his touch of personal perspective here and there, all create a very welcoming environment for this encounter with the Lord in the Word. Also, the invitations to

wider readings that give us context to the great and wonderful story, the prayers that help us respond and the connections to the Psalms to be used at the end of the day help us to interact with the Word in different and inspiring ways. An excellent contribution from Monty so that we continue to celebrate many IFES anniversaries loving, studying, living and sharing the Scriptures.

RICARDO BORGES
IFES SECRETARY FOR SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

This book by Dr David J Montgomery provides a helpful way to explore Luke's two contributions to the New Testament (Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles). The way in which the passage of Scripture is opened up for us each day provides a model of solid Biblical study, done with a devotional heart. The stories which are mingled into the exposition, many of them from people touched by the ministry of IFES, bring personal application of the themes being discussed and underline the book's other purpose, namely, to mark the 75th anniversary of IFES. It is also delightful to see a Psalm for each evening, in a day when the Psalms have become somewhat neglected in the worshipping life of the church. I thoroughly commend this book.

THE REV PROFESSOR ATB MCGOWAN
*DIRECTOR OF THE RUTHERFORD CENTRE FOR REFORMED
THEOLOGY*

Luke's Gospel – and his sequel, Acts – record how God's redemption story found its climax in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and as the Good News was preached to all nations, starting in Jerusalem. This story hasn't finished, and students in IFES movements across the globe are living and speaking for Jesus in remarkable ways. As Monty invites us to meet Jesus afresh, and introduces us to students around the world following him, expect to have your own heart changed and your passion for student ministry stirred.

PETER DRAY
*INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, UCCF; CO-AUTHOR OF REALITY
AND OTHER STORIES*

To our god-daughters, Paige and Hanna
Be students of the Word

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FOREWORD

When you read the history of student ministry and the early beginnings of IFES it reads a bit like the book of Acts. There are perilous voyages, stories of God's miraculous provision and student movements emerging in many different countries at the same time.

For example, IFES' first connection in the Caribbean came when the plane that Stacey Woods (the first IFES General Secretary) was travelling on had engine problems and was forced to land in Jamaica for a few days to be repaired. During that short time in Jamaica, Stacey connected with local church leaders and learned that the University of the West Indies was opening its first campus there later that year. The Christian student movement in Jamaica was soon formed and the partnership with IFES continues to this day.

A few weeks ago, I was in Nigeria and met Kola Ejiwunmi (known as Uncle Kola), the first staff worker of the IFES movement in Nigeria, NIFES. The stories he told of his epic journeys, travelling on foot and by bus all around Nigeria in the 1960s and 70s, certainly had the feel of an apostolic adventure.

So, what better way to recognise our 75th anniversary than to look back to that even more significant story of beginnings, the story of the first apostles and the emergence of the church as described in the book of Acts. In my first months as General Secretary, this was the book I reflected on in my personal devotion time, and I am thankful to David Montgomery for bringing me back to it again. In Acts, we are reminded of the fragility and vulnerability of our human nature, the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, and God's amazing grace and mercy. We see clearly that God alone is the ultimate author, not just of the story

of Acts, but the story of the church, of IFES and of our lives.

The theme of our 75th anniversary is *Unfinished: Living God's story in the university*. As well as using this milestone as an opportunity to look back and give thanks to God for all he has done since IFES was founded, we also take this moment to recognize that we have much more to look forward to and pray for. The global student population has more than doubled since the year 2000 and continues to grow. Students today face a plethora of stresses and uncertainty, and they need the hope of the gospel as much as ever. In this context, our vision is to see students thriving together as communities of disciples and impacting the university, the church, and society for the glory of Christ. This story, God's story in the university, remains unfinished, and we are committed to playing our part.

The book of Acts connects with this theme of an unfinished story. In itself Acts is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke, which is 'an orderly account' (Luke 1:3) of 'all that Jesus began to do and teach' (Acts 1:1). You cannot read Luke without reading Acts, and you cannot read Acts without being left wondering what happens next and it is itself a healthy reminder that God's story continues. There is a thread that runs from the Gospel of Luke through the book of Acts to the early beginnings of IFES, and it continues into your life as you navigate this month of devotions. By God's grace, we are invited to be a part of this great story, and I pray that this month of devotions will encourage and inspire you as you play your God-given role.

TIM ADAMS
IFES GENERAL SECRETARY

*Oxford, UK
March 2023*

PREFACE

The Bible is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path. It is healing for the soul; it is the breath of God himself. Through it, God challenges and comforts, rebukes and restores, exhorts and encourages. It is, in its entirety, God's revelation of himself to us.

The Bible can also be misused. Not just in obvious ways by the abusive and unscrupulous, but also by well-meaning Christians who, often in an effort to make it 'personally relevant', take verses of Scripture and make them mean things they were never intended to mean. That is why Bible study is important: it is learning to understand Scripture in its own terms, respecting the context and obeying the message, no matter how uncomfortable it makes us feel.

However, Bible study can easily become an abstract thing; too much brain activity and not enough heart-engagement. I am privileged to work for the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) and I love how one of our core values is not simply 'The Bible', but 'Scripture engagement'. All Bible study should primarily and ultimately not be about us, but about God, his relationship with us, and how we can experience him.

I remember Darrell Johnson being interviewed at the 2015 World Assembly and sharing how, before he opened a passage to prepare for preaching, he asked himself (referencing the Song of Solomon): 'What does this passage tell me about him whom my heart loves?' That should be the question for all of us when we open Scripture at any time, regardless of our background or previous experience with the Bible.

Speaking personally, my journey with Scripture

has gone through various stages. I was privileged to be taught it as an infant sitting at my parents' feet, and was fascinated by it as a listener: it was a bedtime story *for me*. In adolescence, as I committed my life to Christ and read it regularly as a spiritual discipline, I saw it as a story *to me*; a set of exhortations to help me live well as a disciple.

Then, as I grew in the faith, I realized it was a story *about me*; I saw more clearly my own shortcomings in the lives of its flawed heroes and marvelled at the sufficiency of Christ to cover all my sin. As I studied it more deeply in seminary and embarked on a preaching ministry, it became (not always for the best) a story *from me*; truths that I felt commissioned to pass on to others. Eventually I realized that these strands all needed to come together and, as I grasped more firmly the depth of God's grace, they became a story growing *within me*.

As we engage with Scripture, the Spirit who inspired those authors is the same Spirit who is convicting and, hopefully, changing us.

This book is written to commemorate God's faithfulness to IFES over seventy-five years. However, it is also written for all who are interested in going deeper in their own engagement with Scripture, and to hear something of the way God has been at work among students and graduates over the decades. Since 1947 generations of students have sought to fulfill the vision of the founders of IFES: to plant an evangelical Christian witness in every university in the world. It is a missionary vision founded on the missionary heart of God.

This devotional aims to take us through two important books in the New Testament which outline the story of Jesus and the church he planted. They are both written by Luke who was an eyewitness of the birth and growth of the Christian church.

As a historian, his work has been carefully researched (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1–3); as a medic, he has a particular interest in verifying and reporting the many healings carried out by Jesus and his disciples; as a Gentile, he has an eye for the outsider, the poor and those who often felt excluded by traditional religion. He shows how Jesus opened the kingdom of God to those on the margins, both inside and outside Israel. Similarly, he reports on how the Old Testament's vision of God blessing all nations began to be realized more fully in Paul's missionary journeys throughout the Graeco-Roman world.

How to use this book

The devotionals aim to dig a little deeper into the passage so that the reader will not only find some inspirational thought for the day, but will also understand the text and grasp some of the main themes that Luke uses to frame his story of Jesus and the church. To get the most out of this book you should plan to set aside enough time to:

Pray: Before you do anything else, ask the Lord to open your heart and mind to his Word, and to give you understanding.

Read: Then, open your Bible and read the original text. Some of the passages are quite long, but it is important to read them all in order to understand both their context and message.

Reflect: After reading the comments in the devotional, take time to consider your own reflections on the passage – meditating on it and perhaps journaling the things God has specifically been saying to *you* through his Word.

Respond: Use the prayer as a means of beginning your own time of prayer and response to the day's readings, and ask for wisdom in how to apply them. The prayers for the Acts passages have been written by IFES colleagues around the world.

I hope that this book may also inspire you and give you the confidence to study the whole of Luke and Acts yourself. That is why I have included 'The Wider Story' section featuring questions and comments to help you understand what is happening in the passages not covered by the devotional. In this way you'll be able to appreciate each day's passage in its wider context.

We conclude each section with 'An Evening Psalm', chosen for its connection with the day's theme.

For those who are time-poor but don't want to rush the experience, an alternative approach could be to spend a week reflecting on each 'Day' of the devotional – especially if you want to tackle the 'The Wider Story' section as well. This approach could also have the advantage of giving you seven days to reflect on the Evening Psalm before you sleep.

However you choose to use it, my prayer is that by the end of this book you will not only know more about the mission of God, but you will know him and be inspired to serve him faithfully and with full assurance of the inheritance he has promised us all: 'rejoice that your names are written in heaven' (Luke 10:20).

DAVID J MONTGOMERY

WHITEROCK, CO. DOWN, ST. PATRICK'S DAY 2023

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Personally, I want to acknowledge: David and Laura Jennings whose homes have been places of retreat where many of these pages were first written; my colleagues on the IFES Europe team, including my PA, Lorna Moore, who sometimes had to wait longer than they should have for answers to emails while I finished this book; and my other global colleagues who supplied the prayers for Acts.

Above all, thanks to my wife Gwen who, as well as writing many of the prayers for the Luke section, has been a constant gift and support to me in life and ministry.

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PART 1: LUKE

DAY 1

THE PROMISE

READ: LUKE 1:1–4, 26–56

You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.

LUKE 1:31

The story of Jesus is the central pivot on which everything else hinges. His life and ministry look back at all that God had done in the Old Testament, and look forward to what he will continue to achieve through his new covenant people, the church.

Luke is different from the other Gospel writers in that he was a non-Jew and, in his Gospel, he has a particular interest in Jesus' embrace of the outsiders: the Gentiles, the poor, the outcasts and those who often felt excluded by traditional religion. He was a historian and his two volumes were carefully researched (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1–3); he was also a physician, so you may notice many of the healing miracles reported with a doctor's eye. At the end of the Gospel (Luke 24:27, 45) we read of Jesus opening the Scriptures to his disciples and showing how from the beginning all Scripture testified about him. So let us meet him as he is introduced to us by Luke.

There is clearly something special happening here. Luke writes of a supernatural visitor announcing a supernatural birth. If God was about to do something unprecedented, and if this child, Jesus, was indeed to be different, then we should not be surprised that the circumstances of his birth are also unique.

God in history

Look for the historical markers: Luke says he has researched thoroughly (verse 3) and that he has sourced eyewitness accounts (verse 2). Notice the references to places, times and dates (verses 5, 26, 39, 56). These are special days marked by God's supernatural intervention, but Luke is also careful to establish the historical reality of what was happening.

God through history

Luke also tells us that these events have a context. While they are unexpected for the main actors in the story (Mary, Joseph, Zechariah), they are in line with what God has been planning all along. Look for how this story mentions previous stories – those of David, Jacob, Abraham (verses 27, 32, 33, 55) – and how the characters see themselves as part of the bigger story of God's unfolding purposes through generations past and future (verses 48, 50). God had promised this day would come, and 'no word from God will ever fail' (verse 37).

God beyond history

Although the story is firmly rooted in space and time, the real action is taking place elsewhere. God is the one who establishes governments and changes regimes and who will bring justice (verses 51–53), and he sends his messenger to announce the birth of a child supernaturally conceived who would be none other than the Son of God (verses 26, 35). This is indeed the focal point of history: God breaking into his creation, to save it (see Luke 1:76–79).

As heaven and earth meet in this story, and as Mary encounters the divine, notice her changing emotions

from fear (verse 29) to questioning (verse 34) to humble obedience (verse 38), and finally to inexpressible joy (verses 46–47). Think on how these emotions can mark our own encounters with God. Mary would still have many questions – and fears – ahead of her, but her willingness to be open to the will of God and her final posture of praise and deep joy should inspire any of us who want to be ‘the Lord’s servant’ (verse 38).

A student story

I think of Kristine who found herself in a strange country. She was from a small island and had gone to East Asia to study for her master’s. She was desperately alone and was called ‘outsider’ by many of the other students, but she was determined to be available to witness to Jesus in any way possible. She just didn’t know how. Soon however, being an ‘outsider’ opened doors for her to teach English to her neighbours. Then she connected with the small IFES group in the university, and little by little, as she and the other students studied the Scriptures regularly, they were encouraged through listening to God’s Word to be more committed in sharing their faith. They did this, knowing that, in their country, evangelism is about investing in people in the long term until they understand and can see the truth of the gospel. Kristine’s willingness to battle through her loneliness and be available to Jesus, to obey his Word and trust his promises, echoes that of Mary in this passage.

PRAY:

Lord God, I praise you for your faithfulness throughout history. Thank you that you did not abandon your creation but intervened to save us. Like Mary, I have many questions and fears, but, like her, I want to be your humble and obedient servant, and I want to experience the deep joy that prompted her song of praise. This year give me glimpses of your glory that my soul may glorify you and my spirit rejoice in you, God, my Saviour. Amen.

THE WIDER STORY

READ: LUKE 1:5–25, 57–80

The rest of Luke 1 tells the parallel story of the birth of Jesus' cousin, John. Verses 5–25 tell of a similar supernatural announcement; then verses 57–80 recount the birth of John and his father's song of praise (paralleling Mary's song). Look for the similarities in the songs, especially God's faithfulness to his people through the generations and his care for the humble and those in need.

REFLECT:

- What does the song of Zechariah teach us about God's character and purposes?
- How does it encourage or challenge you?

AN EVENING PSALM

READ: PSALM 75

This psalm proclaims God as judge and king. The ‘horn’ (verses 4, 5, 10) is a symbol of kingly strength: Zechariah mentions it in his song about the new king to be born (Luke 1:69). Similarly, verse 7: ‘It is God who judges: he brings one down, he exalts another’ may have been in Mary’s mind when she sang her song (Luke 1:52). Like the songs in Luke 1, it is a psalm about God’s judgment on the arrogant, his dethroning of the powerful and wicked, and his raising up of the humble and righteous. So how will we respond to such an awesome God of justice?

The phrase ‘as for me’ (verse 9) is a popular one in this section of the Psalms (see 69:29; 70:5; 71:14; 73:2); it draws a contrast between how the world *seems* and how it *is*; or between how *others* are responding and how *we* should respond. ‘As for me’ are three simple words of faith (just one word in the Hebrew!). The psalmist does not know exactly how things will work out, but he is resolved to be faithful to God. In this psalm he is resolved to ‘declare’ what God has done (verse 9) – also translated as ‘proclaim’, a mission word (verse 9, NLT). Even though evil seems to be all around, God’s justice will come. Reflect on the things that may cause you to doubt or stumble in your walk with God, and in faith, like Mary and Zechariah, pray the words of verses 9–10.