

# See Salvation

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Date: 21 September 2008

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Let's bow our heads and pray. Now as we turn to your word, our Heavenly Father, we pray that you would reveal the Lord Jesus Christ to us and shine the light of his goodness into our hearts.

And as the thoughts of our hearts are exposed, help us to turn and trust and to love him above everything else. We ask in his name. Amen.

Amen. Please sit down. Amen. Well now Luke chapter 2, if you take your Bible out and follow along, page 55.

Very familiar territory. Luke chapter 2 and the birth of our Saviour. And I confess to you, I don't know anything about stocks, shares and high finance, but after this week I don't think I'm alone.

I've read lots of reports this week and the roller coaster and the \$500 billion bailout. And one of the things that all the reports seem to agree on is this all points to something bigger.

[ 1 : 1 5 ] Nobody knows what it is exactly. So yesterday I turned to Conrad Black, who I thought would be a trustworthy... Are you laughing at that?

He said capitalism carries the seeds of its own self-destruction. I'm sure what that means. I'm sure what that means, but I think it was very helpful. People say that trust has broken down, that the financial institution and marketers have cultivated our greed, and we've just got to confess that we've let greed get the better of us.

And it's a sign to us we're not really in control. And I think as people have tried to make sense of it, I've been working in Luke chapter 2, and what happens in Luke chapter 2 is so big and so remarkable, and the problem is we're familiar with it and we think we understand it, but it is so remarkable I think it's difficult to make sense of it.

And what Luke does is he gives us two signs in chapter 2. I don't even notice that. Two signs that say that what is going on points to this amazing reality behind the bare facts.

And I want to just look at the two signs with you. The first is in verse 12. It is the sign of the manger. Angel is speaking to shepherds. Verse 12.

[ 2 : 3 5 ] This will be a sign for you. You'll find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger. Why is that a sign? How does that help us understand what's going on?

We go back to the beginning of the chapter and we find that Luke paints the birth of Jesus on the broadest possible political historical canvas. Massive power, financial control.

If you look at verse 1. In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. We meet in verse 1 Caesar Augustus. That wasn't his real name you know.

His name was Gaius Octavius. And he called himself the Caesar Lord. And he called himself Augustus. Oh August one. Dan has these tendencies.

We will call him most excellent Dan. The truth is verse 1 tells us there's no one higher on the totem pole than Caesar.

[ 3 : 43 ] Caesar has status to burn. He made an inscription to himself which we found somewhere which says this divine Augustus Caesar son of a god imperator of land and sea the benefactor and saviour of the world.

It's pretty good isn't it? That's the kind of thing you once said about yourself. And his power is very real. I mean he's reached the top the whole world is his.

I think verse 1 that is why Luke says all the world should be enrolled and verse 3 all went up to their own towns. That's power. He says jump and everybody in the empire jumps.

Everyone has to stop what they're doing and go off to their ancestral home. And how does he do it? What's the mechanism for this control? It is the census or it's translated here the enrolment.

This is the perfect combination of political power and muscle and money. You see the way Caesar wanted to control his empire he wanted every name on the list so that every single person would pay him tax so that he could be the divine august one.

[ 4 : 55 ] And it's very interesting I don't know if you noticed it as Mary read it but four times in the first four verses there's this drumbeat enrolment verse 1 enrolment verse 2 enrol verse 3 enrol verse 4 this is the context of Jesus' birth and what the census does is it combines money and power the two things around which we order our lives and the basis of our status and Caesar uses them to exert massive control.

There's only one problem it's the sign of the manger and in a little tiny backwater of the empire there's another king who is being born without Caesar's permission without Caesar's knowledge without his blessing it's a real king and there is Caesar thinking that he's got control and he doesn't have a clue and the irony is that even in exercising his control by sending people back to their ancestral homes what he's doing is he's furthering the purposes of salvation of God and fulfilling scripture.

There's another king who's being born and his throne we know from what the angel said in chapter 1 it's the throne of David and that throne he will sit on that throne forever and of his kingdom there will be no end and this king doesn't need to make up names about himself to feel better about himself and he's not going to bring the Pax Romana by imperial stormtroopers he's going to bring the true peace of shalom and salvation by being nailed to a cross by a Roman soldier.

That's the point of the sign. The sign is not the sign of power it's the sign of a fragile baby in an animal food trough not in a palace but wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger a manger and I think we've got to admit to ourselves this is completely the wrong way around I mean if if you and I were in charge of arranging the birth of the son of God the king of kings the one who's going to rule forever we wouldn't do it this way I would wait until there were satellite television hookups everywhere in the world I would have 200,000 bolts of something blasting but that's the point isn't it there are two kings and Caesar is the perfect illustration of the way we've put the world together you know the way status and money work and the thing is as Jesus comes he radically subverts status and power that's how his kingship works that's why this manger is a sign to us it brings out the deep truth that salvation and peace are not in our control they're not going to come from all those kinds of things they're going to come from

God through the child and one of the things we're going to see again and again in Luke is that salvation is the reversal of the way we think and of the way we live and of the way we put things together I want to just give you one illustration if you put your hand in chapter 2 and turn over to chapter 16 for a moment 16 in that chapter Jesus gives us two shocking parables about money and our love for money and exposes our trust in money and in verse 14 we read this the Pharisees who were lovers of money heard all this and they scoffed at him Jesus said to them you are those who justify yourselves before men but God knows your hearts for what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God now here's the thing money and status are not wicked and evil in themselves but they are dangerous and they are deceptive we are to use them but not to love them or to trust them they are given to us not so that we can consume and feel better about ourselves but so that we can use them for the sake of the kingdom the problem is they promise more than they can deliver they promise happiness they promise meaning and they appeal to us trust us trust us love us and Jesus points out very simply you can have all the money and all the status in the world and completely miss what life is all about what does it profit you to gain all the world and to lose your soul this is very difficult for us if you have status and if you have money and the Pharisees say to Jesus you've got it wrong Jesus we can have both we can have money and God we can have status and salvation we can do both and look at verse 13 the thing that sets it off no servant can have can serve two masters either he will hate the one and love the other or he'll be devoted to the one and despise the other you cannot serve God and mammon that's very strong isn't it

[ 10 : 26 ] I mean come come on Jesus surely there's just a little bit of wriggle room on this no says Jesus this is the stark truth you can only have one master you either serve Caesar or you serve the child and that takes us back to the sign in chapter two you see sign is not the census it's the manger that's where our treasure is our treasure is not with Caesar it's the baby in the food trough that's where the good news is that's why the angels go to shepherds shepherds are at the very bottom of the status totem pole and there they are in the darkness which is a lovely picture and the glory shines in verse 10 and the angel says be not afraid behold I bring good news great joy come to all the people she was born this day in the city of David a saviour who is Christ the Lord it's good news of great joy because it is for all the people it doesn't matter about status or finance or power

Jesus comes as saviour and lord to everyone who recognises the glory of God in the animal food trough and that is why I don't know if you noticed or not but three times Luke drew our attention to the manger verse 7 wrapped him in swaddling cloths laid him in a manger verse 12 the sign you'll find him wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger verse 16 I don't know if this is going too far but I wonder if there's an echo here of the day when Mary and the women and the others pulled Jesus body off the cross they took him down and they wrapped him in linen cloths and laid him in a tomb it's a very similar phrase if you're writing the news of Luke 2 the big news it looks like Caesar's and the census are big news doesn't it and the birth of

Jesus wouldn't even rate a mention on the back of the Jerusalem post and all the status and all the power seem to be with Caesar but that's not the way heaven looks at it the angels tell us how heaven thinks and the angels say Caesar's rule it's the rule of darkness there's only one true lord he's in the manger and although all the money is flowing to Caesar salvation and light and grace are flowing from the baby to us and the fact that the child is in a manger overthrows overturns the world as we know it that's the sign that's the first sign second sign is in the second half of the chapter in verse 34 we move from the world of revenue Rome to the temple in Jerusalem and there in the temple we meet two people Anna and Simeon a man and a woman who represent the best of Israel

Jesus is brought up and presented in the temple and verse 25 and 26 Simeon is called has a great CV he's righteous he's devout and he's looking for the consolation of Israel that's a lovely way of speaking of the Messiah the consolation the comfort of Israel it's interesting how much of Luke in the early two chapters comes from the book of Isaiah and in Isaiah 40 God says comfort comfort my people her warfare is ended her iniquities are pardoned and then in chapter 51 he says I am the God of comfort and I will turn your wilderness back into Eden and we're told that the Holy Spirit is acting on Simeon empowering him as a prophet so that when he speaks under the inspiration of the Spirit it's not just his words it's the words of God which is very important in all the gospels we're not just given the bare facts we're also given interpretation that's what the angels are doing that's what

Simeon is doing we get to hear the Holy Spirit's view of the baby and when Simeon sees the baby in Mary's arms he rushes over scoops up the baby in his arms and begins to sing a song of blessing to God just as the angels did he says I can die a happy man I've seen salvation with my very eyes that's kind of a loose translation of verse 29 Lord now let us thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word mine eyes have seen thy salvation thou hast prepared in the presence again of all peoples a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to thy people Israel he looks at the baby he says I see salvation it's wonderful isn't it nothing abstract about this salvation is the baby the specific baby born of a specific woman the extraordinary purpose of

[ 15 : 46 ] God for salvation which has been running since the creation of the world now comes into the very ordinary life of a woman and a man in Israel this child is salvation a light of revelation to the Gentiles the final word to end all words the light in our darkness to give us the true revelation of the knowledge of God through the forgiveness of our sins and the thing about the sign the sign of the baby is that salvation is universal and particular it's universal because it is salvation for all flesh all humanity this is the point at which salvation is universal but it is particular because salvation and light revelation and forgiveness are only found in one place in the baby and that is why Simeon turns to Mary and the tone changes and he speaks about the sign verse 34 he says this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel a sign they'll be spoken against a sword will pierce through your heart your soul also that the thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed this is the first indication in the gospel of the massive conflict and the massive opposition that

Jesus creates it's a prophecy of the suffering and of the ultimate death of Jesus on the cross because you see we are affronted being told that we're in the dark and we need the light of Christ and we are deeply offended by the fact that God should choose just one person through which our salvation can come and you can you can paint this any way you like but the coming of Jesus reveals the fact that salvation brings both unity and division inclusion and exclusion and we keep trying to we keep trying to create a middle ground but we can't do it you can't have light and deny the darkness we want to say there's no sword here it's all it's all peace and light and niceness but I think that's just pretense do you remember Mary in her song she sang God has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the humble and meek that's not just a happy metaphor if people will be saved the mighty have to be put down so that they come to repentance and the humble have to be lifted up so that they'll receive repentance he's speaking about us the problem in the end

I think is this child it's this child who people will oppose because the child says to us you have to repent and change it's this child who on many who will rise and many will fall on because as he brings light he reveals the secrets of our hearts and he brings a kingdom that threatens our carefully constructed control of this world and the light and salvation as it comes to us it exposes who we really are whenever we hear the gospel being preached it ought to lead us to deeper repentance if the Holy Spirit is working in your heart now it ought to lead you and I to a deeper repentance exposing our deception our pathological love of control we don't want God coming along and saying that what we think is important is not all that important we work very hard to set up our territory our finance our status and it's very upsetting for someone to come along and say you're trusting and you're loving and you're building on the wrong things and that is why people either stumble over Jesus or they rise on him and the story at the end of chapter 2 is just the most perfect illustration of this we didn't read it but you know it's the only story of Jesus' childhood we have in the gospels at the age 12

Joseph and Mary take him up to Jerusalem for the Passover and as they're travelling back they realise they've lost boy Jesus so they go into a frantic search and they find him in the temple and there he is surrounded by a group of people absolutely stunned at his godliness and his wisdom verse 48 of chapter 2 Mary says son why have you treated us so behold your father and I have been looking for you anxiously and he said to them how is it that you sought me did you not know that I must be in my father's house and they did not understand the saying which he spoke with them and he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them and his mother kept all these things in her heart it's not that Jesus is being defined he's not being disobedient he just says it in verse 51 it is that the purpose of God and the salvation of God redefines what family is it takes all our priorities and lowers them from being number one it makes God the father the most important thing and rearranges our life so that family and Caesar and money and all the good things are now seen in relation to God and his purpose of salvation and that is the second sign the sign of the child so here are two signs friends the first is the manger and the reversal of salvation and the second is the child and the exposure of the light of salvation and I find it very helpful in verse 50 that after all that they've seen and heard

Mary and Joseph do not understand I dare say they understand quite a lot actually I mean they have you know Mary heard the angel they've heard the shepherd's words from the angel they've heard the song of Simeon they've sung a few songs themselves but I think what we're meant to see is this but what is happening here is so unspeakably beautiful and amazing that it is beyond us to master it and to control it what are we to do I think we are meant to respond as Mary does twice for emphasis in verse 19 Mary kept all these things pondering treasuring them in her heart verse 51 his mother kept all these things in her heart what we are to do is we are to take these things that are so big and so remarkable and so beyond us and we are to take them into our hearts to meditate on them and ask the Holy Spirit to plant them to root them so that they will bear fruit don't allow Satan to come along and choke the word with the cares and anxieties of the stock market don't let him strangle the good word with the love of pleasure and luxury and riches but ask the Spirit to help you hold fast so that you'll bear fruit of this it is the good news of great joy for all people to us is born a Saviour who is Christ the Lord

[ 23 : 42 ] Amen Shall we pray? Lord we come to you in prayer forgive us our lack of prayer forgive us we who defy your grace and turn elsewhere for understanding elsewhere for help elsewhere for wisdom Lord we come to you in prayer Lord in your mercy Lord we pray for the nations nations in turmoil we ask for wisdom wisdom for those taking counsel as financial foundations are shaken we pray for peace in our world we pray for peace in Afghanistan especially remembering our troops there we pray for peace in Iraq for order and good government to come to Darfur

Lord we pray for so many places of conflict and dispute in our world we pray for our queen we pray for our prime minister Lord we pray for all who govern grant to them sobriety and good judgment and grant to all the knowledge that in the fear of you the living God is all our good Lord in your mercy and we pray for that new world which God has created in the world we pray for the holy catholic church we pray especially for those who take counsel for our communion in these troubled times we pray for the archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams we pray for our archbishop Gregory Venables we pray for

Bishop Don Harvey we pray for Bishop Malcolm Harding Lord we would pray today for missionaries for those who spread the gospel for pastors and teachers and for administrators who take counsel for the particular concerns of our communion grant us Lord your wisdom in these things make us always as meek as doves and as wise as serpents do speak good shepherd and cause us your people to listen Lord in your mercy hear our prayer and as our Lord would have us we would pray today of course for the suffering we pray for those who are poor for the homeless for the destitute for those in hospital for those crushed by life's burdens

Lord teach us to remember always that when we ignore these we indeed ignore you and by name today we would pray for Rowena for Fiona for Ron we would pray for Janet for Marguerite especially we remember today Mayron that his immigration challenges would issue in his favor Lord hear our prayer for these and all upon our hearts and minds who suffer Lord in your mercy again Lord in conclusion good and gracious Lord thank you for this great mystery the gift of prayer we thank you for your answers to prayer your answers which are always good and gracious and which bring a praise which is really beyond all praise

Lord we thank you Lord in your mercy hear our prayer love yeah so nh whether