



'Working in the world of finance, I come across many who have very healthy bank balances but who are poor in other ways. This book will be a real help to many – both those who are seeking a richer experience of life and a true relationship with God, and those who are currently blind to their true position. It is written in a clear and lucid style, is free from religious jargon and is very accessible. Full of illustrations, the authors unpack what it means to live in relationship with the living God and so to live life to the full. This is a great book to read for yourself and an excellent one to give to friends and colleagues.'

Simon Pilcher,

CHIEF EXECUTIVE, FIXED INCOME, M&G INVESTMENTS, LONDON

'Not a safe book. Peter Dickson is a bit sneaky (the book is so engagingly written) and yet terribly stubborn (he refuses to offer you a bland, smooth, mass-market, shrink-wrapped Jesus). So reading it may make you savingly angry or fearfully grateful-either of which will be okay. I find so refreshing this combination of contemporary clarity and old, rugged gospel.'

Dale Ralph Davis,

AUTHOR

'This is one of the best books of its kind that I have seen. It brings the familiar chapters of Luke's Gospel into the arena of the Twenty First Century, and makes the Christian faith real and relevant. One of the chapters is entitled "The Real Jesus". We encounter him throughout this whole book. I predict a wide use for it.'

Eric J. Alexander,

FORMERLY MINISTER ST GEORGE'S TRON, GLASGOW

'Peter Dickson has succeeded in transporting his readers from Aberdeen to the shores of Galilee in this vivid account of Dr Luke's impeccably researched biography of Jesus. But I must confess that this journey comes with a health warning – as we look at Jesus we'll discover much more about ourselves.'

Rico Tice,

AUTHOR, *CHRISTIANITY EXPLORED*





‘Almost \$100 billion is spent in the USA every year on medical research. Yet the humbling truth for all of us who sit across the desk from you in clinics and hospitals the world over, is that a scientific answer for the deeper sicknesses and troubles that we all experience will always be out of reach. But what if someone has the answer and it costs mankind nothing?’

This book will steer you through the observations of a remarkable physician, Luke, who practised medicine 2000 years ago. It may have been long before antibiotics and scans, but he recognised and meticulously recorded the most significant event in world history. So whether you have never opened a Bible, or have one languishing on a shelf, I recommend you dust it off, take this book, and start a journey through the life of Jesus Christ. Using this book as a guide, you will learn to listen for what the Bible really says and come to see that it is anything but a quaint collection of tales.

This book will present you with a truly life-saving treatment – more than anything I or any other doctor can ever offer you!’

Simon Barker BSC (Hons) MD FRCSEd (Tr&Orth),
CONSULTANT ORTHOPAEDIC SURGEON, ROYAL ABERDEEN CHILDREN’S HOSPITAL





Rich

The reality of encountering Jesus

Peter Dickson
with David Gibson



CHRISTIAN
FOCUS



Peter Dickson has been minister at High Church, Hilton in Aberdeen since 1996. He grew up in Edinburgh and St. Andrews and became a Christian through the witness of Scripture Union camps. He is married to Eleanor, who comes from Inverness, and they have two children, Esther and Jamie.

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You can find out more about their work by visiting:
www.highhilton.com

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Preface

Sometimes a class of young children visits our church building as part of their school curriculum. As they arrive at the church door, all chatting cheerfully, the teacher invariably turns to quieten the children down. 'We are entering God's house, quiet now, you must be quiet.' The assumption, sincerely held I know, is that to be in the church building is the same as being close to God. There is the further assumption that God would, for whatever reason, object to hearing our voices.

Many people assume that to attend church must be the same as being close to God. To be involved in church *must* mean that we are involved in God's work. To be a leader of the church *must* mean that you are even closer to God than other church members. But the very opposite may be true. It is possible to be close to the church and far from God. It is possible, common even, to have all the outward trappings of Christian faith on display but not to have the heart of the Christian faith in place. If I walk into a bank because I hold an account there, make an appointment to speak to the manager and have a card that I can put in the ATM, that does not mean I have any money in the account. If my account remains empty then all the contact with the bank becomes somewhat meaningless. Similarly, were



PREFACE

I to visit your house for an evening that would not make it my home. Sitting at your table does not, in and of itself, make me part of your family. Something much more radical is required to make me belong.

My aim in writing this book is to explain what it means to belong to God. Being part of his family depends on one thing only: knowing Jesus Christ. I want to show why Jesus is the most important person who has ever lived and why encountering him is a matter of urgency.

Some who read these pages will be very familiar with church. I'm aware that others may have had little or no contact with Christianity. You might vaguely remember childhood involvement in church or some other religious activity, long since outgrown. Perhaps you have an occasional or formal interest in spiritual ideas. My assumption is that whoever we are, and whatever has happened to us in life, we share a common problem for which there is a surprising answer. I hope to show that what God gives us is not what we would ever dream of receiving. What God demands of us is not the kind of response we would ever expect him to desire.

Each section of the book is an attempt to explain a portion of Luke's Gospel. The relevant part of Luke is printed at the start of each chapter. What I have written will make most sense if you are able to take the time to read what Luke has written.





Acknowledgements

Writing this book has reminded me of my deep gratitude for the people who presented me with the claims of Jesus Christ. They led me to the rich experience of being forgiven by God. Others have since patiently taught me to appreciate the riches that come from knowing God. If this book achieves its simple aim of enabling people to encounter Jesus, then my gratitude for my mentors and friends will be greater still.

About five years ago Rico Tice suggested to me that a book, based on Luke's Gospel, would be valuable in helping others to hear the message of Jesus. I am grateful for his suggestion and for the enthusiasm with which it was offered which made the project seem realistic.

That this book ever became more than an idea is entirely due to the skill, patience, hard work and clarity of thought which David Gibson has brought to the task of it being written. I am very grateful for all the help he has given and for every other aspect of his involvement in our church family over the past six years.

A number of friends took the manuscript for a test drive and brought it back with excellent suggestions for improvement. I am indebted to Doug Easton for his sharp insight and





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detailed interaction with both the style and the content of the material. I also want to thank Simon Barker, Eleanor Dickson, Leonie Dryden, Jonathan and Jacqueline Gibson, David Humphris, Stuart Irvin, Will and Hannah Lind, Simon Pilcher, and Paul and Ruth Reed. Many of their comments have been incorporated and the book you now hold in your hands is much the better for them.

The church family at High Church, Hilton has been encouraging, appreciative and supportive for fourteen years as I have sought to help us listen to God speaking through the Bible. I have been very fortunate to serve people who have been patient with me, hungry for God's word and prayerful in their growing desire to bring others to know and love Jesus Christ. I dedicate this book to them with the hope that it may help us invite others to receive and treasure the generous grace of God.





A Rags to Riches Story

¹⁴Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.

¹⁵He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

¹⁶He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. ¹⁷The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸ The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,

¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

²⁰Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, ²¹and he began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'

²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. 'Isn't this Joseph's son?' they asked.

Luke 4:14-22





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The credit crunch

At the end of September 2008 the world went into financial meltdown. You probably remember what happened (although, if you're like me, perhaps you didn't understand much of what the news reported). Suddenly, the expert chatter of accountants and high-flying financiers filled the daily headlines. On 15 September, the first in a string of 'Manic Mondays', we saw Lehman Brothers, one of the world's largest banks, collapse. Within days, the UK government had nationalised mortgage lender Bradford & Bingley; Lloyds TSB had agreed a £12bn takeover of Britain's biggest mortgage lender, HBOS; and regulators had closed down Washington Mutual, an American bank with assets valued at £307bn.

Banks caught with bad investments now owed more than they owned. The result was a frenetic global search for rescue packages and bail-out schemes to restore market confidence and financial stability. Shockwaves rippled round the world as the US House of Representatives first rejected a £700bn rescue plan for the US financial system, before finally accepting an amended proposal. In Britain, politicians dashed between Downing Street and various international destinations in a desperate bid to prop up collapsing banks and stop the money disappearing. On 8 October, *The Daily Telegraph's* lead article asked, 'Who will re-order today's world?' The crisis demanded decisive action. The world needed someone to step in with the insight, resolve, and ability to make a difference.

How did you feel when all this was happening? Some were simply bewildered—after all, the bank account looked the same and the cash machine still gave out new notes. Others were genuinely fearful over job-security, agitated about the future, anxious about a lifetime's savings put away for retirement or for their grandchildren. Loss of control in situations like this may soon create panic. We fear the loss of the world we know. We wonder if anyone can bail us out of the mess.





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A rescue mission

It might come as a surprise to you, but the Bible describes Jesus as the ultimate solution to the worst credit crisis the world has ever known.

The passage from Luke's Gospel printed at the start of this chapter reveals the reality of the global crisis described in the Bible. These verses recount an incident right at the start of Jesus' public life. It is the announcement of his manifesto: a crucial statement of what he is all about and what he has come to do.

Jesus has returned to his home town of Nazareth. Back in the familiar surroundings of his childhood, he delivers the Sabbath sermon in the synagogue. Expectations were high; we're told that wherever else Jesus had preached 'everyone praised him'. The atmosphere was electric. This promised to be a memorable sermon: 'the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him'. And when he's finished, Jesus is clearly the leading contender in *The Times* 'Preacher of the Year' competition. The entire congregation is astonished at the 'gracious words' that fall from his lips. I have only once preached in my home congregation in St. Andrews, Scotland, and the reaction to my sermon was mild and innocuous at best. That's probably how most people react to most sermons. On the scale of relevance, preaching often registers somewhere between mind-numbingly dull and dreadfully disappointing.

Maybe the reaction Jesus received was because his sermon was so short! Actually, it wasn't that at all. It was because Jesus read one of the most amazing promises of rescue in the Old Testament, and then claimed to be the rescuer whom Isaiah described: 'Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.' In the book of Isaiah, God had promised 'good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind, and release for those oppressed', and Jesus says, 'I am the one who will do it. That is what I am here to do.' How are we to understand this





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mission statement of Jesus? Who are the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed that Jesus has come to help?

You will find the poor in London, Paris, or New York, although some of them may seem rich compared to those living in third world shanty towns. Countless thousands in India, the Philippines, and the vast cities of Latin America or Africa, live on virtually nothing and die every day from preventable disease or malnutrition. If Jesus had these poor people in mind, and his good news was the alleviation of their poverty, he clearly embarked on an unsuccessful mission. Indeed, as we read on in Luke's Gospel we discover a curious fact. After saying that he has come to preach good news to the poor, we often find Jesus in the homes of the wealthy. Luke seems to go out of his way to show Jesus fraternising with the rich.

What about freedom for the prisoners? This claim could leave us scratching our heads when we know that Jesus' own relative, John the Baptist, languished in a prison cell before King Herod had John's head lopped off as a present for one of the pretty dancers at his birthday party. Rather macabre after-dinner entertainment we may think; but did Jesus simply not get there in time? Either that, and he failed in his mission, or Luke intends us to see something more in what Jesus said he came to do.

Next, consider the blind. Jesus says that they are to receive their sight, which would be good news indeed. Of course Jesus gave eyesight to some blind people. There are, however, millions of blind people in the world today who would perhaps be sceptical about Jesus' claim to be a preacher of good news to them.

When it comes to the oppressed, many regimes ignore every human rights clause in the book. They subject people to conditions that should not be permitted for animals, and the dignity of justice (political, social, and every other kind) seems a mere pipe dream.

Please do not misunderstand me. The needs of the economically poor and the physically oppressed are high on God's





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agenda for this world. It's just that people often mistake these matters for the core of Jesus' message. So what does Jesus mean by talking in this way?

God's favour and my debt

The key to understanding what Jesus came to do is found in the short summary statement of his purpose, which is easy to miss. It appears at the end of what he read out in the synagogue that day: 'To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour'. That phrase encapsulates all that has just come before it, and sheds further light on each of the things that Jesus will do.

Think back to the Jubilee Campaign which was so prominent in the year 2000. 'The year of the Lord's favour' is a phrase rooted in the Old Testament idea of a Jubilee year. Among the people of Israel, God established the practice that every seven years there would be a Jubilee year when everyone's debts would be wiped out and their property returned. All the slaves would be set free. God's people would have a clean start. A Jubilee year. A year of favour. Jesus says: 'I have come to proclaim the favour of God to everyone who owes him a debt. I have come to end the spiritual credit crisis that has left you destitute and bankrupt, and which you are powerless to sort out.'

No one likes being in debt. Some of you reading these pages take great pride in the thought that you have always worked for what you have, and you have waited before buying the things you want so that you would never be in debt. It's horrible to be in serious debt. Jesus is saying, 'I have come to create the ultimate headline: "Good news, Good news! Listen - all debts can now be cancelled. You can have a clean start with God. He is going to cancel everything that you owe to him. This is the time of God's favour."'

This announcement may raise a real question for us: in what sense am I in debt to God? You may be familiar with the words of the Lord's Prayer, 'Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors'. In the Bible, 'debts' is a common way of describing





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'sins'—the things we do that separate us from God and twist our relationships with one another out of shape. By calling our sins 'debts', the Bible is creating an image drawn from the real world we inhabit to help us understand exactly what it means to be in the wrong. We may borrow money from the bank, or from a friend, and therefore be in debt; so too the reality is that we are in debt to God. We are in debt because of who God is, and because of who we are and what we have done. We might work all our lives to avoid debt to banks or credit cards, yet all the while we have a massive debt in our spiritual bank account with the God who gave us life.

According to the Bible, because God is our creator, we owe him everything. He loves us and therefore sustains our lives and provides us with everything we need to live for his glory. Tragically, however, we have squandered our God-given privileges and resources, creating a dire situation of insolvency. We owe God everything but have no way of paying back anything.

Picture a student who has irresponsibly forgotten to organise accommodation for the new academic year. Fortunately, his aunt lives in town and offers him a room for nothing. She cooks his meals, does his laundry and irons his clothes, yet six months later she has not received one word of thanks for all she has done. When we see someone take and relish a gift with no appreciation for the giver, we think, 'That person is ungrateful and selfish.' When someone gives something to someone else, at the very least it creates the debt of gratitude. The Bible says that every human being is like that student with free accommodation: a life of overflowing gratitude is a debt we owe to God, but which we have not paid. We have enjoyed God's good gifts without pausing to adore him for them. We have lived in his world without giving him the worship of our hearts; we have lived as if he is not even there. Truth be told, even when we hear that God is there, we don't want him (or anyone else) ruling our lives. We'd rather God was out of the way so we could have his job.





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To live with ingratitude, ignoring God, whilst making ourselves rulers of our own lives means that we create for ourselves a spiritual credit crisis. We are in the red with God. We owe him. Just like a lender might send a letter to say 'Full payment is now due', much like a library might send a note to recall an overdue book, if God were to call time on the life he gave us and in which we have ignored him, what could we use to pay him back?

Many of us instinctively want to point to the good things we have done, the kind of things we hope might just haul us out of the spiritual red into the black and tip the scales in our favour. We imagine that we would be able to offer God the gold of loyal service to others, maybe even service in his church! We come with the silver and bronze of careers which have been publicly recognised. We approach God with the currency of children who have turned out to be responsible citizens. But the problem with even the best that we can bring is that it is like offering the bank a handful of copper coins to repay a £1m mortgage. It is Jesus who came to help us see our bankruptcy.

Most of us feel uncomfortable when asked to consider our genuine spiritual need with honesty. The truth is that our debt problem is so bad that we cannot solve it ourselves. We need a bail-out package—a rescue plan. We need someone to write off our bad debt; to deal with our toxic assets. If we think that we can be good enough for God, then what we fail to see is that how good we think we are depends on who we compare ourselves to. Compare yourself to Hitler, or Stalin, or the guy on the front page of the *Evening Express* who set fire to a block of flats and you will come up smelling of roses. But what if you compare yourself to Mother Theresa? What if God only accepts into his kingdom people who are that good? Worse still, what if we compare ourselves to God himself—what kind of goodness would be good enough for a perfect God? The reality is that there will never be enough credit to overcome our debt. We





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need our debt cancelled. We need it written off. Paid for and taken away forever by someone else. But who?

When Jesus stood in the synagogue that day what he was saying was this: 'I have come to cancel what you owe to God. However much you are trapped in the poverty of a totally self-absorbed life, however blind you have been to God's fatherly love and care for you, however imprisoned you are in a sin-mangled life, I can give you a fresh start with God.' Trying to pay off our debt to God ourselves is an impossible burden. It cannot be done. What we need is grace: someone to do for us what we cannot do ourselves. Jesus came to release us from the agony and grim toil of trying to earn what cannot be earned.

Luke's Gospel and this book

As we begin to take in what Luke tells us about Jesus, let me be honest with you. So far I have only given you half the story of Luke 4. We have left Jesus with his congregation in raptures at his preaching, but by the end of the chapter the same people are so furious with him that they try to murder him by throwing him off a cliff. Things turned ugly that day in Nazareth, and it was all because Jesus realised that his listeners hadn't understood a word he had said. They are poor, but think they are rich; blind, but think they can see; enslaved, but think they are free. So instead of words of grace for them, now Jesus only has words of judgment. They embark on a rejection of Jesus that will seal Jesus' rejection of them. This shows that encountering Jesus is a hazardous business. There is no neutral position to occupy once he has addressed us. Either we hear what he says and believe him, or even our indifference and our apathy counts as a rejection of him. In the final chapter we will come back to this second half of Luke 4 to see exactly what turned a polite congregation into a mob baying for Jesus' blood.

But before we get to that last chapter, we will explore how Jesus brings wealth instead of poverty, sight instead of





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blindness, and freedom for those in captivity. That's what makes up the main body of this book: different facets of the greatest bail-out the world will ever see. We won't be able to look at everything that Luke has written, so I have gathered some of the main examples of where we see Jesus rescuing the lost. We will focus in on Jesus as the one who can take us from the rags of spiritual bankruptcy to the unimaginable riches of all our debts being wiped out. Along the way we will ask:

Why does Luke think that Jesus can make us rich?

What is this wealth we should want more than anything else in the world?

What do we have to do to get it?

In chapter nine we will return to the second part of Luke 4 so that we have the chance to see what the Nazareth congregation was unwilling to see. In other words, as we see Jesus announce God's solution to our true poverty, my hope is that you will see—just like me—that you are one of the poor, one of the blind, one of the oppressed, one of the needy. These chapters explain that Jesus brings the best news I have ever heard, and I have tried to write them in such a way that they offer you the real meaning of Luke's Gospel, which is the best news you will ever read.

Why should we believe Luke?

There's one more thing to consider at the outset: how can we trust what Luke has to say to us about Jesus? For many people, turning to the pages of the Bible to read about someone who lived two thousand years ago is similar to reading a bed-time story to children, which begins, 'Once upon a time...'. Those opening words of any fairy tale are the give-away that what you're about to read is make-believe. Magical, wonderful, mysterious, but certainly not true. When we turn to the opening pages of Luke's Gospel we read about an angel appearing to an





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old man, a virgin conceiving a child, and then shepherds on a hillside catching sight of thousands of angels in the sky. If we're honest, it might seem more sensible to admit that we're in the realm of the fairy-tale. All great stuff for the nativity play, but that's where it belongs. No firm basis in reality, either in history or in our twenty-first-century lives.

There is one problem with this viewpoint. Luke does not begin his Gospel with miraculous events but with a sober-minded explanation of what he is doing. Consider the first words he wrote:

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 eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me 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.

Luke 1:1-4

We can't be completely sure who Theophilus was, but his appearance here at the start of Luke's Gospel means that Luke wrote with a clear purpose in mind. He wanted to provide his friend with the kind of orderly account that would help Theophilus be certain of what he had been told about Jesus. Luke's aim is to give us a reliable, truthful, historically accurate portrait. When we see his aim clearly then the weird and wonderful events with which he starts his account (angels, a virgin birth, shepherds and the like) take on a historical rather than fictitious character.

Take the shepherds, for example. Luke tells us that an angel announced to them that a Saviour had been born, and that this angel was then joined by a whole host of angels who were praising God (Luke 2:8-13). If Luke was trying to make the miraculous sound remotely plausible then shepherds are





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the last people he would have picked for the task. Shepherds were not recognised for their hard work or skill. They were the lowest form of human life in their day, men who were fit for nothing else, and the last to be considered worthy of receiving important news.

Whenever we hear news, we usually want to find out if it comes from a reliable source. If the workplace gossip stops you in the corridor and passes on some tasty titbit of information that he heard in the staffroom then you are wise to listen to it with caution. But if your solicitor phones you with some news then you are going to pay a bit more attention. No one in their right mind would invent a tale being announced to shepherds, not if they wanted people to take it seriously. Unless, of course, it was true. Unless you had to record that it was announced to shepherds because that's what happened.

But there is even more to it than this. The fact that angels appeared to shepherds is part of a recurring pattern in the opening pages of Luke's story. It ties in closely with the main thrust of Jesus' mission. He has come for the very people we might least expect him to care about. The historical details of Luke's narrative aren't just there to convince our minds; they are there to humble our hearts. They are there to show us that Jesus has come for people in debt, people like us—if we are willing to see that we need him.





God in the Dock

²⁶In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'

²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. ³¹You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.'

³⁴ 'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'

³⁵The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.'

Luke 1:26-35





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¹In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ²(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³And everyone went to his own town to register.

⁴So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'

¹³Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴'Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.'

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'

Luke 2:1-15





Turning the tables

The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defence for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the bench and God is in the dock.

C. S. Lewis, who wrote those words, was correct: most of us decide for ourselves whether God deserves our respect or even our attention.

The complaints arrayed against God boil down to two kinds. On the one hand, God is too distant and detached; too impersonal. We therefore conclude that he is not accessible or near to us. On the other hand, God is too demanding of us and expects too much from us; his standards are too high and he does not love us as we are.

A recent dramatisation took up these issues by portraying a group of Jewish men in a concentration camp, facing death in the gas chamber. The night before their extermination they decide to put God on trial for what he has done. In a moving drama, they agree that God is to blame for what has happened. He has let them down at the point where they needed him most. God is remote in the hour of their greatest need, and his love for them as his chosen people is thrown into doubt because of his absence.

This drama is powerful because very little of it is made up. The questions it raises aren't just asked by philosophers and theologians in the comfort of academia's cloisters; they are the questions you and I ask as we live in a world which often doesn't make sense to us. Crisis may enter our lives in the form of unemployment, marital breakdown, bereavement or





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betrayal. When it hurts the most, what we want to know is: if there's a God, where is he and why doesn't he do something?

Luke's Gospel makes the startling claim that in Jesus Christ, God has come down to us. He stepped into our world and stooped down to where we are. God is not remote or absent or unloving; he is present. Jesus lived in our world for over thirty years. He had an address, he drank wine and ate food and, most significantly, he knows all about our pain.

Some years ago, when he was President of the United States, George Bush flew in to Iraq on Thanksgiving Day to be with the armed forces of his country. He knew it would be effective in all sorts of ways to go there and be with them. A boost to morale, a publicity manoeuvre that proclaimed, 'We can win and I'm right there with you.' A visit like that is strategic, but it is also fleeting. It is wonderful to have your Commander-in-Chief with you for an evening, but he will not be with you in the morning. Precisely because he is the most important person in America, he will not be on the front-line as bullets whistle through the air. He will be long gone, whisked away in the safety of his armoured vehicle or military helicopter.

When Jesus was born, God came to be with his people. But it was no furtive or fleeting presidential visit. Rather, the Son of God became a human being and came into our world as the king whom God had always promised to send. He came to be the rescuer, to take the bullets, to bail out the troops when victory was no longer possible. This deliverance, planned by the God who made the world, was not passed down the chain of command for someone else to carry out. He came himself. Jesus was born.

They say that at eight days old it is sometimes possible to predict a child's personality and character. Perhaps it is the doting grandmother or the overwhelmed new father who has studied this little bundle of joy and is confident they know what wee Jimmy is going to be like. 'Oh what a laid back fellow





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he is—just like his father.’ ‘Oh what a demanding little thing you are—just like...’

We know the kind of conversation and, of course, it’s mostly nonsense. The truth is we have no idea what direction a person’s life and personality and circumstances will take. Nor can we disentangle that potent combination of nature and nurture because, from birth, they are intertwined and inseparable. And, really, we don’t need to know.

So it is remarkable to discover that again and again in the Bible when a significant child is born God tells people in advance exactly what is going to happen and what the child is going to do. God does this to show us that he is organising his world and people. To help us recognise him and know him, God has recorded in the Bible several instances where he says in advance what is going to happen. Then, when it does, everyone can say, ‘Oh, this is just as the prophet said. We knew to expect this.’

Of the many examples of this in the Bible the most significant is the birth of Jesus. His arrival would probably have gone unnoticed had it not been accompanied by so many words from God explaining what was going on. Take a look at the first three chapters of Luke. Announcements from God seemed two-a-penny in those days: angels and prophets and priests; Mary and Joseph receiving a much needed explanation; a star so striking that it couldn’t be missed; and even the birth of another baby who would serve as a messenger about Jesus.

The birth of Jesus is surrounded by words and explanations. There are so many we can’t miss them. Except—we do miss them. In many schools the nativity play does not contain a single sentence of explanation about who Jesus is or why he came into the world. That gives the impression that the point of these incredible events was so that we could have donkeys on a stage and tea-towels on the heads of little shepherds while two lucky children get to be Mary and Joseph. Luke says to us—





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don't just look. Listen! Listen to what God is saying because it is only his words of explanation that make sense of what is happening.

We will look at three different aspects of Luke's description of Jesus' birth. First, we will look at words spoken to Mary, which declare that Jesus will be a king who reigns forever. Secondly, we will notice the details of Jesus' birth, which reveal that Jesus is a king who serves. Thirdly, in the words that the angel speaks to the shepherds we will see that Jesus is a king who can save us, whatever our situation. Luke thus gives us a three-fold explanation of what this incredible birth means. Each aspect says something astonishing about Jesus.

The king who reigns forever

The angel tells Mary that the child she carries will be an eternal king, rather than a temporary one. Her son will be given 'the throne of his father David'. Like any child born into a royal family with a claim to the throne, Jesus is born in Israel's royal line, the family of David, and therefore the throne belongs to him. But that isn't all. Not only is Jesus the king, but he will be king forever: 'The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.' There is no-one to come after him. No next-in-line. He will never abdicate; there will be no more coronations. Jesus is king forever.

I don't know any ordinary human being who will live forever. Some people seem to have been around forever. Terry Wogan has been on the BBC since broadcasting began. Paolo Maldini played left-back for Italy since the game of football was invented. We know what it's like to have people in the world who seem to go on and on and who always seem to be there. And yet, of course, we know that they won't be. One day they will die. No-one will remember Wogan in fifty years and Maldini's knees eventually wore out. If you've never heard of either of them then that probably proves my point. Jesus is no





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ordinary child because he is a king forever (not just temporarily, like every other king). These words of the angel explain that he is not a mere human being. Somehow, with more mystery than we can ever comprehend, here is the eternal God coming to be born on earth and to reign as king in a way that will never end.

This sheds some light on the objections of distance and indifference on God's part that we aired at the start of the chapter. The Christian faith will not help you if you want to raise questions about God in the abstract. The gospel will not help if you want to talk about where God is, but you do not want to talk about Jesus. The Christian faith will not answer your questions about what God is up to, or why he is not doing what you think he should be doing, if you do not want to talk about Jesus. There is no Christian view of God that does not recognise that we can only talk about God meaningfully if we talk about Jesus. If we talk about Christianity, and in the same breath talk about a detached or distant God, then we are talking about two different things. For the meaning of the angel's words to Mary is not just that God has come near to us, but that God has become one of us. You can't get nearer than that.

That in itself is incredible. But if it's true, how would you expect God to behave when he entered our world?

The king who serves us himself

Think now of the second objection—that God is too demanding of us—and notice some of the details at the start of Luke 2. We have the historical details which announce when all of this happened: 'In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register' (Luke 2:1-2). It's the kind of detail that could make our eyes glaze over as we skim on to the more interesting bit about a baby being born. But Luke wants us to see that God arrived in





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the world during a census: he came when the events would be documented. Here is God himself stepping into the real world at a specific moment in history and in a particular place.

More than this, however, there are practical details which explain the extraordinary significance of what is happening. 'While they were there (in Bethlehem) the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn' (Luke 2:6-7). We're so used to this from hearing the Christmas story that we miss how staggering it is because of what Mary has been told. Her son will be called 'the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end' (Luke 1:32-33). If we're reading carefully we will do a double-take and read again. The birth of an eternal king who will rule forever, the Son of God, in an animal's feeding trough?

Ponder what these details show us about Jesus. He is a king—but he does not come to a throne in a blaze of dazzling glory. He comes to a place where there is no room for him. He lies among the animals. The amazing thing about the birth of Jesus Christ is not just that here is the supposedly distant God stepping into the world to be near us. More amazing than that, here is the supposedly demanding and insensitive God, stooping down to serve us, not coming to make demands of us.

A friend of mine visited Thailand and was taken to visit an expensive shrine that housed the local god. All around the deity on the floor were gifts of money and food brought to him by his devotees. My friend was struck by the fact that the god sat there in comfort while the worshippers lived in abject poverty, desperately hoping that if they did enough to please him then things might get better. The good news in Luke's Gospel is that God acts differently. He has abolished religious pretence because when he comes into the world he does not come to live in an expensive shrine (or church!) to be served



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by people who are trying to impress him. Instead, Jesus is born in a smelly outhouse because he has come to serve those who want nothing to do with him. It is an amazing contrast. It takes a lifetime to get the dynamic of what God has done into our thinking; it seems so strange that we can hardly believe it. That Almighty God should come down from heaven, and before he ever asks us to do anything for him, he insists that he must first serve us. He must stoop low and be born in a manger because that's what we need him to do.

One of my colleagues went to Malawi recently. Wherever he went, after being introduced to the people, the women would come and kneel in front of him. And of course he was thinking, 'No, no, no, you don't need to do that! You don't need to serve me. It's not right.'

It's tempting, isn't it, to think of us needing to be served as nonsense. 'How bizarre to think that I need God to serve me or to save me. I am fine without him; I am self-sufficient and competent. I could lend God a hand, and I know his poor old church is always needing people and money. I could certainly do a bit for God, but to think that he could do anything for me! No, God, you don't need to do that! I have everything money can buy and I am protected by insurance policies and pension schemes. I think you had better serve other people, Lord Jesus, but I really don't think you need to serve me (unless, of course, a crisis comes my way which I can't control. In which case I will get in touch).'

Luke says to us, keep reading my account of Jesus Christ and observe what he does. Listen to what he says as he makes people rich, sets them free and gives them sight by serving them. Be careful to understand that he wants to serve you in a particular way. He wants to serve you by placing himself in the dock. For the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ in a stable (when the local hospital may seem more appropriate) is just the beginning of his stooping low to serve and to rescue the lost outcasts of this world like you and me. It is a journey that will take him from





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the manger to the cross. The supposedly distant God steps into the world. The supposedly demanding God bends low, not just to serve me, but even to stand in the dock instead of me.

The king who saves us—whoever we are

By the time we've read the opening chapters of Luke's Gospel we have met an assortment of people. We've read about angels appearing to old men, young women, and the rough-and-ready shepherds on a hillside. There is significance in all these details because they show us the kind of people that the king of the universe wants to be with when he enters the world. Wouldn't we normally expect a great king to be with the rich and famous and to be right at home in celebrity culture? But when Jesus entered our world, the people he came to be with included those who in the first-century belonged in the category of the 'poor'. People whom society didn't take seriously or have much time for. Luke is making a deliberate point. God is not just interested in the people who are normally regarded as worthy and attractive. After the angel announces to Mary that she will give birth to Jesus, Mary cries out in praise to God:

⁴⁹For the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵²He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. ⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

Luke 1:49–53

The words of Mary's song are a beautiful summary of Jesus' own mission. Jesus has come for the humble, the outcast, the hungry, the weak. He has come for people who cannot help themselves. He has come to rescue them. He has come as their Saviour. This is exactly what the angel told the shepherds





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on the hillside: 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord' (Luke 2:10-11). Why should a message about a saviour be announced to shepherds? The shepherds, you remember from chapter one, were ill thought of according to the social ranking of the day. This means that there is no one so bad, so irrelevant in the eyes of the world, so unreliable, so sinful and looked down upon that they are unworthy to receive this message. That is why the angel says this message is 'for all the people'.

Some of us find the idea of God helping certain people hard to swallow. We think what they have done puts them so far beyond the pale that the thought of Jesus coming for them is an outrage and an offence. They are too bad and do not deserve forgiveness.

On the other hand, for many of us it is not other people who seem unworthy of the good news. Sometimes we are our own worst critics. We don't need other people to tell us that we are unworthy of God's love because we tell ourselves that every day. And some of our own harsh self-assessment may be true. But listen again to the angel. This news is for everyone regardless of what they have done. This news is for you regardless of what anyone says about you and regardless of what you think of yourself.

We can be slippery characters when the God who loves us wants to address us directly. When God tells us that he loves us we hang our heads in shame and say, 'Oh, I'm not worthy of God's love'. When God says 'I want to speak to you about your sin problem', we deny there is a problem at all. When God wants to lift us up, we put ourselves down. When God's word speaks honestly about what is wrong with us, we stick our heads firmly in the sand. How direct the angel was when he spoke to the shepherds: 'I bring you good news of great joy—a Saviour has been born to you.' To you shepherds. The facts are





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true. It really happened. But better still the message conveyed by the facts is also true—Jesus came as the Saviour for all types of people.

In the passages from Luke printed at the start of this chapter there is a word that appears three times: 'favour'. Mary is told twice that God's favour has come to her; the shepherds hear that God's favour is now shown to the earth. We met this word in chapter one when Jesus burst onto the scene. He said he had come 'To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour'. The end of all debts; the ultimate bail-out. The best fresh start in the world. Now we can see that Jesus is repeating exactly what God had said about him when he was born. He is the king and so he is powerful enough to do what he says. He is the servant king and so he will bend down to lift the fallen. He is the saviour king and so he will set his people free. God has come near to us in Jesus.

