

FACT OR FICTION

Luke 2:1-5 *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. So 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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

One of the most important questions to ask of any faith or belief-system is, "Is it true?" Luke had no interest in writing fiction; he wanted to present an accurate account of the character, life and mission of Jesus, based on first-hand, eye witness evidence (see [Luke 1:1-4](#)). All the events surrounding the birth of Jesus must have been so etched in Mary's memory, that she could give a very detailed and personal description. The Roman census is an important fact. It anchors the date into history and is one of the reasons why Jesus was born in Bethlehem and not Nazareth.

However the main reason for the journey was that His birthplace was chosen by God. The Old Testament prophecies told of the Messiah being a Son of David, and being born in Bethlehem (see [Micah 5:2](#)). But neither Mary nor Joseph had planned the 90 mile (145 km) journey in late pregnancy. It was certainly not convenient even if it had been theologically essential. It was one of those situations in which God took a hand, using the secular government census to get His people in the right place at the right time.

Because God is always in charge of His kingdom, He can use any means He wants, to ensure that His will is done. Even when we may think that the circumstances are working against us, God is working for the good of those who love Him (see [Rom 8:28](#)). God's great power, combined with His foreknowledge and wisdom will always achieve His purposes. In retrospect it often amazes us to see how God has used apparently unrelated circumstances to place us where He wants us, and to bring mercy and grace at just the right time. Therefore, we should not be surprised, and should trust Him, that whatever He allows is His choice to bring about whatever He desires. Wise believers will praise when they cannot understand, and will wait in confidence to see how the Lord will unfold His plans. The unwise will try to engineer life to suit their plans, and often suffer the consequences of resisting His will. And don't forget that the Lord may use you to strengthen another believer at work, by reminding them of this truth.

Prayer: *Ever-wise Lord. Thank You for Your ability to use every circumstance to achieve Your purpose. Please forgive me when I resist your will or distrust Your handling of my affairs. Help me to trust that You really do know what You are doing, even in the hard times and through pain. We know that Jesus trusted You to take Him to the cross, and that His suffering has won eternal redemption for us. Because Jesus knows what that injustice feels like, help me to appreciate that He understands what I am going through, and that I do not need to fear or fight, because Your will is being done. In Jesus Name. Amen.*

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INCARNATION

Luke 2:6-7 *While they were there, 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. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

We do not know how long Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem before the birth of Jesus, but it was during their stay that God the Son was revealed in a human body, born as a baby. They may well have stayed in the city for a longer time after the birth. [Matthew 2:11](#) says they were in a house, and Herod's discussion with the Magi led him to kill all the boys in Bethlehem who were two years old or younger. So they could have been living there for a year or so before their evacuation as refugees to Egypt (see [Matt 2:13-15](#)).

However, Jesus' first days were in the humble cradle, which Mary would have remembered only too well. It did no justice to the majesty of the King of kings: but it was prophetic of the way in which His ministry would close, rejected as the lowest of the low - crucified on a cross. Few people who celebrate Christmas ever ask themselves the obvious question, "Why should God come, live and die in such a degrading way?" The Bible's answer is that it was for us!

[Hebrews 2:14-15](#) says, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." [Galatians 1:3-4](#) says, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." So although His birth was not glorious for Him, and it sparked violence from a jealous king; it brought glory to God and would bring peace to believers on earth, just as the angels said (see [Luke 2:14](#)).

Worldly thinking puts the chief executive in the biggest house and the best office. But although God is supreme, He has no pride of status. Although He is our creator, He was willing to endure the worst His creation could serve up to Him. So nobody can say that God does not care or understand or feel what it is like for us. [Hebrews 4:15](#) says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin." That is the real Jesus who loves you and gave himself for you. Thank Him, praise Him, worship Him; and trust Him with all of your heart - because He really does care for you, your family, friends and colleagues. Obey the instruction of [Hebrews 4:16](#) - "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need".

Prayer: Dear Lord. Thank You for being willing to suffer with humanity, so that You understand. Thank You for suffering on the cross for humanity, so that I can know peace with God and freedom from fear. Thank You for knowing me and those around me today. Help me to honour what You went through for me, by trusting You today, with all my heart. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

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FEAR IN THE FACE OF GLORY

Luke 2:8-10 *And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Anything abnormal or unexpected will cause a reaction. News of a wedding or examination success may bring joy and smiles; news of a death or failure may prompt tears. The essence of a joke is that the ending is unexpected, and the twist in thinking should launch laughter. The more an event or announcement is unexpected - the greater the response. Fear is a whole-body, physiological reaction to a personal threat for which a resolution cannot be immediately seen: and terror is uncontrolled fear.

These verses say that the shepherds were terrified that night. Their usual routine was shattered by a unique angelic appearance to the group of men, accompanied by a bright light which they described as the 'glory of the Lord'. But why should the Lord's presence be so greatly disturbing? In the Old Testament, God told Moses that it would be fatal to see His face (see [Ex 20-23](#)); Gideon was petrified by an encounter with God's messenger (see [Judges 6:22-23](#)). And Isaiah's response to God's angels gives the clue to all their fear - he recognised his sinfulness in the face of God's all-consuming holiness (see [Isaiah 6:5](#)). The truth is that impure human beings cannot survive in the presence of God's purity.

But that was why Jesus came. His appointment on earth was to 'become sin for us' (see [2 Cor 5:21](#)). It was only because He accepted the Father's wrath against our sin, on the cross, that we can be reconciled to God. So the angel's message firstly calmed their fear; displacing terror by announcing joyful news. That is still the effect of the gospel on those who believe. If you have no confidence that God will accept, protect, guide and provide for you, fear is the only option to the unexpected or matters outside your control. Without Him there is no secure solution to anything, in this world or at the judgement. However, God's desire is that people will receive His good news, and be delivered from their fears (see [Ps 43:4](#); [Luke 1:47](#); [Heb 2:15](#)). They are not just about being terrified by the prospect of death; many people are fearful as they anticipate each day's problems. The solution is the Jesus of Bethlehem and Calvary, who not only came to take away sin, but also to remove the fear which surrounds the sinful. Click onto www.crosscheck.org.uk to know more. And if you already know the Lord's peace and joy; you really do need to tell others, so that they may also receive peace with God (see [Rom 5:1](#)).

Prayer: *Almighty God. Thank You for sending Jesus into the world so that I might know peace, and be released from my fear. The prospect of facing You on the final Day, without the shielding blood of Christ, is too terrible to contemplate. Thank You for sending Jesus to be my Saviour, Lord and friend. Help me to keep on trusting Him every day, and to recommend others to receive His mercy and grace too. In His Name. Amen.*

GLOBALLY PERSONAL

Luke 2:11-12 *Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

The Saviour of the world had been born. His incarnation was so significant that God sent an angel to announce the birth to shepherds. The previous verse records that the Messiah's arrival was good news for every people-group; now unsophisticated farm workers are told that Jesus has been born to them personally and they were instructed to go to meet Him. They were not dressed for a royal visit, so perhaps they were reassured that there was no need to change their clothes, when they knew that they were looking for a swaddled baby, lying where the animals were fed.

Jesus is described as a descendent of David the king, and yet He is also the Messiah from God - the ruler of all people. In Him, the long line of covenant promise, from Abraham through David, fuses with the incarnation of God. Yet the shepherds were not put off. They were told three times that Jesus was for them; and that they were expected to find Him. Of course, the shepherds had their own unique encounter with Jesus: but Jesus had not only come for them, but for everybody; irrespective of their nationality, tribal loyalty or culture.

Many people find the humility of the manger difficult to bring together with the majesty of its occupant. Yet Jesus started on earth as an outcast, was hunted as a dangerous rival, continued as a refugee, and spent the best part of 30 years in obscurity. He completed His mission with a slow painful execution, as a common criminal. Yet He came to save the overloaded businessman, the proud king, the civil servant, fellow trades-people, religious police, professional soldiers and even executioners. They could all have received God's blessing by welcoming Jesus, but most were too proud.

On the other hand, the shepherds knew they were nothing special: and so the humble sinners went to meet the humble Saviour. In fact, you cannot come to Christ in any other way (see www.crosscheck.org.uk to know more). Although God's invitation is to all, only the humble listen and respond. The Holy Spirit works to convict us of sin, so that we realise that we need God's mercy. Humble people will plead for mercy and will accept free salvation; but the proud will use confidence or competence as a mask for arrogance, and will disqualify themselves from God's grace. So let's stay humble ourselves, and pray that the proud will humble themselves to seek the Lord before it is too late.

Prayer: *Gracious God. Thank You for bringing me to realise my need of Jesus as my Saviour. Forgive me when pride rises in my heart to grieve Your Spirit and prevents me from receiving Your grace. Help me to practise humility so that it becomes my lifestyle, and to be a valid witness of the transforming power of Your indwelling Spirit. Help me to pray for those whose pride rejects Your mercy; may my friends and colleagues desire to meet You for themselves. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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GLORY AND PEACE

Luke 2:13-14 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests." (NIV)

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

After the angel's appearance to the shepherds, announcing the birth of Jesus, many other angels joined in chorus. Their task was to proclaim the glory of God in sending His Son to bring peace to human beings. The angels were expressing their own joy as well as their duty: never before had the Creator lived in a human body among His creation, with the purpose of saving them from their own sins (see [Luke 15:7](#)).

Praise is a right and necessary response to whatever God does. The angels glorify Him all the time (see [Psalm 103:20-21](#)). But most of us are temperamentally resistant to praising the Lord; and so we need all the encouragement we can get. Likewise the shepherds that night, after the angels presented their praise in public, issued a command for the farm workers to give praise too. And as we shall see ([Luke 2:20](#)), that is just what they did.

The angels also declared that God would bring peace through Jesus. It was a different sort of peace than the world had previously known. It was not the quiet of emotional stillness, nor a global international anti-war treaty - it was peace with God. Only Jesus could bring an end to human rebellion against God, and to God's wrath against sin. And He did that as He died on the cross (see [Col 1:20](#), and www.crosscheck.org.uk).

But not all will want to receive His salvation; and for them, there is no peace (see [Is 48:22](#)). But those who appreciate God's kindness in sending Jesus should want to praise. Hymns and songs of worship can either be the lively vehicles of rejoicing in God's grace, or the dull repetition of words dredged from an empty heart. So we also need to hear the angels' exhortation and consider what great things the Lord has done for us in Jesus. Then we must choose to rejoice in our hearts, to sing and shout His praise with our lips, and join with others to proclaim the marvellous character and wonderful works of our God. A Christian who withholds praise is like a flower that never blooms, a bank which never opens or an art canvas without any paint. Indeed, without praising the Lord we can never properly locate ourselves in His world or His heaven - because bringing glory and praise to God is our purpose (see [1 Thess 5:18](#); [1 Peter 2:9](#))! Praise is for everybody: shepherds and shop workers, students and secretaries, drivers and dock-workers. So, wherever you live or work, make today a day of praise.

Prayer: *Wonderful Lord. How Great You are! In every way You are holy, and right in all You do. I praise You for saving me through the sacrifice of Jesus. I want to drink deeply of Your grace again today, and to praise You with renewed joy. Please fill me again with Your Holy Spirit so that I may worship You at work and home as well as at church, and speak out the wonders of Your love to those who will hear. In Jesus Name. Amen.*

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RAPID RESPONSE

Luke 2:15-18 *When 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." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. (NIV)*

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Decisions are at the core of any business. Generally, the more difficult, complex or risky the decision, the more people are paid. Decisions are made by evaluating the nature of the issue and possible options in the light of surrounding circumstances and past experience: then rejecting all but one option, being willing to risk one's assets and reputation on the outcome. However, shepherding is not a highly paid job! Yet, they made a decision to leave their sheep and look for Jesus. The reason to do so was not found in their intellect, or past experience; but their inner, God-given conviction that the angels were telling them the truth. They knew that they must not miss this unique opportunity to find the Saviour.

As far as we know, none of them had met angels before. Were they to leave their sheep for a hoax, they would have become the laughing stock of the town - and no farmer likes to be mocked, or find that the livestock was killed by wild animals in their absence. But they knew, deep down, that they had heard the truth from God. So there was no time to waste as they ran down the hillside. They found that the Word of God matched the details of all they discovered; and they believed the prophetic details about who Jesus was and why He had come. Their conversation with Mary and Joseph confirmed that they had met the Saviour of the world. So they decided to tell everybody!

However incredible the gospel might sound to some, others will believe it and act in repentance and faith. When God speaks, He expects a response, and with no delay. Failure to do so might be thought of as prudence, wise reflection or prioritising other things - but God calls it disobedience. Some deride 'simple faith' saying that it lacks intellectual rigour. In fact, once God's Word has been explained, clever arguments are merely a sophisticated way of arrogantly rebelling against the Almighty. The shepherds had no such problem: God spoke to them ... they responded ... the Word was confirmed ... and they responded by telling others. They may not have been thought of as astute business brains, but they made the right decision. When God speaks through His Word, the best decision is not to think that you are right, but to agree that God is right. That is the first step to salvation, obedience, blessing and glory. Starting each day in the Word lets us hear the Lord. Then all we have to do is agree He is right and obey. So put away pride and intellectual arrogance, and simply trust and obey. That is the decision which brings you to glory in the end.

Prayer: *Dear Lord. Thank You for not making it too complicated for anyone to hear, and obey and serve You. Please forgive me when I put up all sorts of objections, which amount to unbelieving disobedience. Help me to humble myself to accept that You mean what You say; and then to do what You have commanded, and share the good news of Your powerful grace with others, at work as well as in the church. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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FUEL FOR MEDITATION

Luke 2:19-20 *But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Luke's account of the nativity was so detailed and personal. After sifting through all the written accounts, he must have interviewed Mary (see [Luke 1:1-4](#)). When his 'notebook' was full of verbatim comments, we can imagine him asking, "So, after the shepherds had left, and there was just Jesus with you and Joseph, what did you think, how did you feel?" He simply recorded, "*Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart*".

A common business folly is to try to absorb too much information, filter out all you do not understand and then make a decision on what you already thought! But Mary was wise. In the past year she had seen an angel, heard that she was to be the mother of God's Son, risked a broken engagement, was sent away to her elderly relative who was also miraculously pregnant, received further prophecy about her future role, wrote a worship song, travelled more than 90 miles just before her due date, delivered the Saviour of the world in an outhouse and laid Him in an animal feeding trough, before shepherds came visiting on the instruction of a chorus of angels. All that was far too much information for the teenage mother to process and resolve; and she knew that all of it was so precious and must not be filtered out. So, she carefully filed the facts in her mind. Then she thought about each amazing message and event, and waited for God to show her what they all meant and how they fitted together: meanwhile seeking to know what she should do next to be obedient. The shepherds had less to process, but they meditated as they praised and told. And it is clear that Mary did the same while talking to Luke.

Meditation is essential for followers of Jesus. Of course, it is a very different kind of meditation than for those who believe it is about emptying the mind. Far from it! Godly meditation takes all the information God supplies, with the circumstances He allows. Treasuring them, the godly place them before the Lord, asking for His help to understand the next step, and trusting Him for all that we do not understand (see [Deut 29:29](#)). Mary was to spend her life unpacking that first year, and the many other surprises along the way, as the gospel accounts tell. But she had grasped one of the great secrets of godliness, to reject nothing God sends and to wait on Him for understanding and wisdom. That takes time and trust; but it is a true mark of godly men or women.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father. Thank You for all You have taught me, as Your Word has placed life's experiences in a heavenly perspective. Please forgive my impatience in rushing my time with You and for the priority I have given to spiritually wasteful pursuits. Please give me a new desire to treasure all You have revealed to me, and a new peaceful confidence to wait until You fit the pieces together. Meanwhile, may I continue to hold everything with a tender preciousness, and seek my next step of obedience as I follow Jesus. In His Name. Amen.*

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NOT ABOVE THE LAW

Luke 2:21-24 *On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons". (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Lawyers and judges are occasionally brought to court to account for some alleged crime; they are sinful human beings like the rest of us. But it makes the headlines, because even law-makers are not higher than the law, they are there to serve it. The same is true for Jesus. The laws of God applied to Him and had to be fulfilled by Him: [Matthew 5:17](#) says *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them."*

Jesus was circumcised, and Mary was declared clean after child-birth, according to God's law given through Moses (see [Leviticus 12:1-8](#)). Jesus was named according to God's Word through the angel (see [Matthew 1:21](#); [Luke 1:31](#)). The offering of two doves was the legally prescribed sacrifice for their sin (instead of a lamb because they were so poor). So, circumcision was the symbolic and bloody removal of 'sinful flesh'. It placed the child under a lifetime obligation to keep the law. Sin-offerings were a physical way of admitting that both the parents and the child would fail but accepted God's provision of a substitute death as a proxy punishment.

All this was prophetic of the ministry of Jesus Christ. He would accept responsibility for the sins of the world, and bear in His body the full weight of God's punishment under the law ([2 Cor 5:21](#)) - see www.crosscheck.org.uk. So Mary and Joseph did everything the law required (see [Luke 2:39](#)) for Jesus, so that He could rescue us from the law's impossible demand of perfection, and its final penalty of death. As [Gal 4:4-5](#) says, *"But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons."*

In any organisation, the person in charge must bear responsibility for the mistakes of the company. So it is interesting to read [1 Peter 2:24](#): *"He Himself (that is Jesus) bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."* This is the reason for Christian peace and joy; for fellowship and service; for worship and evangelism; for hope of heaven and confidence in the face of death. It is the best news in the world! If you believe it; praise the Lord, tell others, and encourage those who follow Jesus not to give up, but to keep trusting. And the best place to start is right where you are, today!

Prayer: *Dear Lord. Thank You for this assurance that Jesus has fully satisfied the law against my sin, so that I may be free to worship, work and witness to the glory of Jesus. In His Name. Amen.*

MOVED BY THE SPIRIT

Luke 2:25-27a *Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

When Jesus was born, it was a non-event to most Jews. That is why the shepherds needed angelic instructions, and wise men were given a star to find the Saviour. But not everybody was spiritually asleep. Simeon was on watch to see the Saviour come. His heart was zealous to keep the law but instead of the hard-heartedness developed by many religious people, Simeon had a soft heart which expected God to take the lead. He was listening for what the Holy Spirit would say.

The relationship between Simeon and the Holy Spirit is worth noting. A person, who accepts the privilege of the Spirit's presence, can wait in quiet confidence while eager in expectation. Simeon did not know when he would see the Lord, but he was confident that he would, before he died; the Spirit had settled that truth in his mind. The actual meeting was also arranged by the Holy Spirit, who gave Simeon the idea of going to a particular part of the temple at just the right time to recognise and meet the special family.

Of course, Simeon's encounter was unique, and God appointed. As we shall see, his prophetic affirmation of the ministry of Christ would help to sustain Joseph, and encourage Mary, even in her darkest days (see [Luke 2:33-35](#)). But these verses discount any idea of accidental encounter or coincidence of timing. The Holy Spirit sustained Simeon in waiting for the Messiah, set up the rendezvous and energised Him to meet the appointment.

In different ways, although still bringing glory to Jesus, the Holy Spirit is active today. He speaks through His Word, and communicates clearly to the people He has brought to new life. Without His convicting, we cannot come to repentance; without His enlivening, we cannot be born again; without His stirring in our hearts we cannot desire to be holy; without His action we cannot be sanctified. Wise Christians will not presume 100% holiness and therefore spiritualise every personal impulse as being from the Spirit, but neither will they quench the Spirit by ignoring His wisdom and guidance. Unlike the special anointing of the Holy Spirit on the Old Testament prophets (and Simeon was one of the last), the Spirit is now with all those who have received Christ Jesus as Lord. Let us therefore welcome His presence refilling us, and walk in step with Him at work each day (see [Gal 5:25](#)). He wants to use you, if you are ready to be involved.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father. Thank You for using people like Simeon, empowered by Your Spirit, to speak Your truth into people's lives. Please also equip me to be useful to You, and give me fresh desire to welcome You into every area of my life. Help me in the workplace today, to work well and to stand up for what is true; so that I may worship You wherever I work, and work for You wherever I worship. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

SATISFIED BY THE SAVIOUR

Luke 2:27b-32 *When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

However prepared we may be, life changing events are always more potent than their anticipation. The death of a loved one induces more grief, and a longed-for birth surprises us with greater joy than we had imagined; and water in the desert produces an intensity of satisfaction for the thirsty traveller. For Simeon, the moment had come. For years, the Holy Spirit had inspired him with a hunger to see God's Messiah. Now, when a young couple brought their firstborn son to be presented to the Lord (see [Ex 13:12-13](#)), he was in the right place at the right time; and the Spirit opened his eyes to see that this baby was the answer to all his hopes.

Jewish rabbis used to refer to the coming Messiah as the Consoler/Comforter of Israel - the One who would come in strength to be alongside and to satisfy the hunger for God's presence. Filled with the Spirit (the 'other Comforter' - see [John 14:16 KJV](#)), Simeon took Jesus in his arms, praised God and prophesied that all the Old Testament promises of salvation would be fulfilled in Him. And, devout Jew though he was, Simeon saw Jesus as the revealer of light to Gentiles too. For Simeon, that moment was enough to fill his whole life. Certain that he had met the Saviour of the world, he affirmed to Mary and Joseph what angels, Elizabeth and shepherds had said, which was just the same as they heard from the angel Gabriel. The old man could now die satisfied. His job in life was done.

None of us can have Simeon's role, but God intends that every believer should serve Him in the motivation and power of the Holy Spirit. Most believers considerably underestimate their value to God and their role in His kingdom. As Simeon knew, the greatest pleasure and privilege is to announce that Jesus is the Saviour for the whole world. Jesus said that He is the Light of the world and that we have a responsibility to enlighten the darkness by our deeds and words. We are to demonstrate that Christ's salvation liberates us from cowering under sin, in order that we can live in the Spirit and proclaim the Saviour. That responsibility starts again today, and in the place where you are. But none of us can fulfil such a mandate unless we are willing to be filled by the Holy Spirit, and walk in step with Him. So ask him for a willing heart to receive the fullness of His presence and His power.

Prayer: *Prayer: Wonderful Lord. Thank You for choosing me to work with You in Your kingdom. Please give me a heart that wants to place Your business as my highest priority, Your message as my most privileged conversation and Your power as my resource to fulfil my destiny on earth. May I rejoice in sins forgiven and a sacred job for life. Help me up when I stumble, and given me enough encouragement to keep moving ahead; but not so much that I get proud and believe the devil's lie that I can do Your work in my own strength. In Jesus Name. Amen.*

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AFFIRMING THE FAITHFUL

Luke 2:33-35 *The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Young parents need all the support they can get. Mary and Joseph were bearing the responsibility of the infant Jesus while miles away from their family in Nazareth. Over the past year God had spoken to them through angels, relatives and shepherds. All the messages said the same thing: that Mary's baby was the Saviour of the world. But how should they bring up such a child; there was nobody around who had any experience of caring for God the Son. The Divine pregnancy and the relocation to Bethlehem had used all their energy, but now that life was starting to settle down, how should they think about the baby and what should they do?

Simeon's words were God's confirmation of all that had been revealed previously. His identification of Jesus in the temple was only possible through the same Holy Spirit who had filled Mary. Jesus' purpose on earth as the Saviour of both Jews and Gentiles was clearly confirmed in Simeon's prophetic song (see [Luke 2:28-32](#)). And Mary would have reported to Luke how she and Joseph were embraced by a cycle of awesome admiration of Jesus, with wonder and thanksgiving of His destiny, yet their hearts were not afraid, but full and content (the Greek word for 'marvelled' contains all these ideas). But then, Simeon's blessing was more disturbing. Jesus would polarise people; their destiny would be linked to His, and that He would face great opposition. For Mary too, her darkest day was yet to come as she saw God's Son crucified on the cross for the sins of the world, but without fully understanding what was happening.

All good fathers communicate with their children. Likewise, with God. Often we need confirmation of what we already know, so that we can grow in courage to face a difficult future. God never promises a life free from suffering, and those who think otherwise get bitterly disappointed. But God is amazing in the way in which He prepares us for the future. He can use any method to get through to us. Of course, as a check, it is important to realise that none of those messages can ever contradict the written Scriptures. So don't be afraid or lose your nerve in a time of trouble. The Lord will let You know the critical information, encouragement or warning which you need at just the right time. And He will use whoever He chooses to relay the message to you. And He may also want to use you to give a message to somebody else. So live in tune with the Scriptures, praying about all the unknowns, and wait for the Lord to make His will known to you. It may be about work or family, community or church. But He will let you know: He is a speaking God!

Prayer: *Dear Heavenly Father. Thank You that You share Your plans with Your people. Thank You for so much which is easy to access in Your Word; and I want my heart to be easily accessible to You, so that I may know Your will and be encouraged to keep on trusting You as Mary and Joseph did. Please also help me to be sensitive to Your Holy Spirit so that I may know how to recognise Your inner affirmation, and take courage for the next step, In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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FAITHFUL TO THE END

Luke 2:36-38 *There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Anna was an old woman. Married for only seven years, what would her life become after her husband's death? Luke tells us that she did not marry again or carry on a trade: she was on a unique mission. She committed herself to a lifestyle of worship, fasting and prayer. But this was not quiet minded pietism; it was all in preparation for the one big moment of her life. But there is no suggestion that she knew when that moment would come, but when it came she knew it was time to step forward to meet Jesus.

We are not told the details of how God sustained her through decades of lonely vigil; or how her mission started. But we do know that at 84 she was well past the normal expected lifespan for those times, but she was ready to do her job. In Jewish law, two witnesses were required to establish truth. On that day, first Simeon and then Anna appeared as God's witnesses to prophesy over the infant as He was presented to the Lord. The text indicates that they were not in league with each other, but that God's Spirit moved them both to be in the right place at the right time with their hearts open to God and their eyes alert for what He was going to show them; and as witnesses, to testify to who this child was.

Anna has been an encouragement to many believers. She kept faithful to the Lord right to the end, and past the point at which most would have given up. She did not so much count the years in the past, as the minutes to come. Anna was always looking for what the Lord would show her, rather than reminiscing over her own past glories: she was eager to see the glory of the Lord. That day she was privileged to announce the Redeemer of the world to all who trusted God to keep His promise; it was not her day of glory but the opportunity to proclaim the glory of Jesus the Christ.

That kind of persistence comes from a lifetime of worship saturated in prayer and sustained by periods of fasting. It was the lifestyle for Jesus, and became the pattern for the apostles. The business of heaven is too big to be cluttered by the trivial diversions of the world. This does not mean that every believer should live in solitary contemplation, but rather that the focus of every day must be the hope of the appearance of Christ. Whatever our responsibilities, we either seek our own advancement and glory, or the advancement of Christ's kingdom and His glory. It is not a matter of religious activity, but a wholehearted commitment to put Jesus first in everything. It starts again today. So pray where you are and ask the Lord to give you that sort of heart, and then live and work towards meeting Jesus when He returns.

Prayer: *Dear Lord God. Please forgive me so many wasted years I have devoted to my advancement; when You have called me to bring glory to Jesus. Whatever my age and responsibilities, please help me to have a new desire to be Your servant and learn to worship You with a whole heart; so that I can live a life which points people to Jesus. In His Name I pray. Amen.*

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FROM LAW TO GRACE

Luke 2:39-40 *When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Luke reminds us for the fifth time that Joseph and Mary had done everything for Jesus that God's law demanded (see [Luke 2:22,23,24, 27, 39](#)). Christ was not above God's law; He was born under its authority, but he was the only person who could fully keep it. Yet He chose to place Himself under the curse of the law in order to redeem us ([Gal 3:13](#)). As [Galatians 4:4](#) says, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons."

Luke moves swiftly from the temple scene, when the infant Jesus was presented to the Lord, and the Holy Spirit moved Simeon and Anna as two witnesses to declare the truth about who Jesus was ([Luke 2:22-38](#)). Luke's purpose is to give his readers good reason to believe in Jesus as God the Son, the Saviour of the world. So he omits the visit of the Wise Men, the slaughter of the babies in Bethlehem and the emergency evacuation of Jesus to Egypt (you can read those accounts in [Matt 2:1-20](#)). After those events the family go back to live in Nazareth. There the child Jesus grew up in a house attached to the carpenter's shop where he was to learn all about wood and nails ([Mark 6:3](#)).

We know very little about His childhood. He grew up normally and yet was unusually 'strong in His spirit' (KJV): that does not mean he was self-willed, but rather that He was very clear about what was true and lived accordingly. He was also wise: He had the ability to apply truth to everyday life, and was so filled with wisdom that nothing He said or did was foolish. It was clear to everybody that Jesus was enjoying all of God's favour. The writer reiterates those character qualities in [Luke 2:51-52](#) adding that Jesus was obedient to Joseph and Mary throughout his teenage years too.

Why is this detail important? Jesus was not just a gifted child who learned wisdom: He was wisdom ([1 Cor 1:30](#)). He not only kept the law but he perfectly fulfilled the law ([Matt 5:17](#)). He was not just gracious: He is still the giver of grace ([2 Tim 1:9](#)). In other words, Jesus was God the Son from the beginning ([John 1:1-2](#)) and was uniquely God in Mary's womb: He was sinless and holy - the only person fit to be the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world ([John 1:29](#))". That is why we can confidently trust Jesus to be our Saviour, and announce His salvation to others.

Prayer: *Father God. Thank You so much for sending Your own dear Son to be my Saviour; to understand how I live and the struggles I face. Thank You that Jesus never ever deviated from the truth and so I can fully trust all that He said and did; and I can have confidence in His sacrifice. I rejoice because I have such a Saviour whose death still atones for my sin; whose wisdom still fully understands me, and whose grace is always sufficient to supply all my needs. I worship You in Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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TRUE TO GOD'S WORD

Luke 2:41-42 Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. (NIV)

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

The Bible has only one story about Jesus as a boy. This is it. But it starts by telling us that Mary and Joseph took God's Word seriously. The Old Testament was their guide to relating with God, with its instruction that every male must attend three festivals in Jerusalem each year: the feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles ([Deut 16:16](#)). Women were welcome, as were children when they could understand ([Neh 8:2](#)).

The pivotal feast of the Jewish year was Passover; remembering how God delivered His people from slavery in Egypt some 1,500 years previously. The Passover lamb was killed in thanksgiving to the God who rescues His people. Mary and Joseph attended each year. They simply obeyed what God had said; however poor they may have been or however difficult the journey (although not so far as to Bethlehem), they joined with the rest of God's people to sacrifice and praise. Little did they know that Jesus Himself would become the Passover Lamb, sacrificed to redeem us from an empty way of life ([1 Peter 1:18-19](#)), and the evil around us ([Gal 1:4](#)).

At twelve years of age, Jesus was within a year of manhood. It was time to be introduced to the heart of Israel's worship, and Jesus was included in the group going from Nazareth. There is no indication in Luke's account that Mary and Joseph had any more direct instruction on their parental role beyond the promises surrounding His birth, and the need to obey the law. They could not have known where it would all lead to; so they took the next step of obedience, and included Jesus in family worship.

The greatest education any parent can give children is to show them that true worship is central to life. This value like any others is both caught (demonstrating what is important) and taught (explaining why they are important). Godly parents warmly include children in family and church worship: this is not just desirable but essential. Even though Jesus was God the Son, He was taught how to worship His Father: and as we shall see, Jesus was in His element. All of us are designed to worship God; but refusal to do so is the most dangerous course anyone can take ([2 Thess 2:10b](#)). Wise parents will engage with their children in Bible teaching and worship from an early age. When God ripens their understanding, it provides the seed-bed for faith, and they will know how to relate with the God who loves them.

Prayer: Heavenly Father. Thank You for Your Word which teaches me why and how I must worship You in a way which pleases You. Thank You for all those who have shown me their delight in worship and taught me how to give my heart to You, hungry to hear Your Word so that I might praise and pray. Please help me to be a good spiritual role model to others, particularly children and young people; and teach me how to explain Your Word to them, so that they will know how to worship You with all of their heart. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

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NOT LOST BUT FOUND

Luke 2:43-47 *After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they travelled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Most parents can relate to the anxiety of not knowing where their child is. After the Feast of Passover, all the pilgrims returned to their homes. For those from Nazareth it was at least three days walking. They would have travelled together, partly in fellowship and partly for security against the threat of robbers ([Luke 10:30](#)). The men and women would talk in separate groups; the girls and young boys travelling with the women, and older boys with the men. But in the year before manhood, the twelve year old Jesus was probably in-between groups. Presumably Mary thought He was with Joseph, and vice versa. When the families reassembled at the end of the first day's journey, Jesus was nowhere to be seen.

So, worried Mary and Joseph returned to Jerusalem the next morning; and the day after they found Jesus in the temple, questioning the rabbis and being questioned by them. This was His third day of discussing God's law, and it seems a crowd had gathered to hear the tutorial, in which Jesus deeply probed the teachers' knowledge, and contributed with understanding which amazed everybody.

It was to be His ministry style. On many occasions, those who posed riddles in order to trap Jesus found that He made them think again by asking them a question. Indeed, Jesus' entire ministry was devoted to making people think: about the source of His power, wisdom, kindness, love and truth. Most importantly He wanted people to know who He was, so that they could believe in Him and be saved through His death and resurrection. He still has the same objective today. Jesus continues to challenge our assumptions, and press us with the question, "Who do you say that I am?" ([Luke 9:20](#)). To resist His right of being our Lord as well as our Saviour, means that we have never understood His salvation - see www.crosscheck.org.uk to know more.

It is good to allow God to put us under the spotlight in order that we can clearly see the weakness of our own strength and the strength of His gospel. Every day we need to believe who He really is. Then we can face anything with Him. And when others try to trap you, why not ask them a question, about who they think that Jesus is, and why? Then you can encourage them to find out the truth in the Bible.

Prayer: *Almighty God. Thank You for sending the Lord Jesus, not only to provide salvation, but also to probe my mind and heart with His truth. I am amazed at the way in which Jesus knows everybody's heart. Please help me humbly to accept Your intimate knowledge of me; so that I may live in Your grace alone. And give me the boldness to ask wise questions to those who resist You, so that they might know that You are looking into their hearts too, and be challenged to trust themselves to Jesus as Lord. In His Name. Amen.*

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HEARING WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING

Luke 2:48-50 *When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying to them. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

This passage is filled with paradoxes; and should leave us asking a big question. After all the extraordinary events around the birth of Jesus, family life seems to have settled into 'normality'. When Mary and Joseph found Jesus in the temple after three days being 'lost', Mary scolded her son, reprimanding Him for not treating them with respect. She refers to Joseph as His father and angrily expresses her fear of losing Him. Jesus, in the same way in which He had been asking penetrating questions of the religious professors, now asks Mary why they did not assume that He would be in the temple. Then He asks if they had understood that He has to be in His Father's house.

Of course, the unfair habit of anxious parents is to scold a lost child - it is a bizarre expression of relief after so much suppressed fear. But Jesus' response to Mary's agitated question was to put a question to them. They had been given the responsibility to be trustees of God's Son; so was it not right for Him to be in God's house? Jesus was not lost at all, He knew exactly where He was; and exactly who He was too. Interestingly it was they who needed Him to save them from being lost. He was not the son of Joseph but the Son of God. Because they had lost sight of His identity, they could not see that His place was with His Father, in God's house doing His business.

But Mary and Joseph did not understand (although Mary clearly remembered the episode and gave a detailed account to Luke many years later). The big question remains, "Why did they not understand?" They had been obedient to Moses' law, they had done the right things, but they did not recognise that God lived in their house. They had seen Him as serving them, and so they were incapable of learning from Him. Despite all their privileged encounters with God's messengers, they were blind to who Jesus was (see [Is 6:9-10](#)). They were like so many today, assuming that Jesus will adapt to their convenience. They had performed the religious ritual and gone home; but Jesus was with His Father, and for Him, that was 'home'. The contrast of mindsets is so stark: ritual versus relationship. It is the same today: and the Bible says only a relationship with God through Jesus Christ will bring peace with God and confidence of heaven. If you cannot see that, ask God to open your eyes; and if your friends are blind, ask Him to open their eyes too.

Prayer: *Dear Lord. Please forgive me for being so unresponsive to all that You have shown me, and all You have done for me. Despite having received so much, I worship so little. Despite Your presence with me I am sometimes less at ease in Your house than my own. Please help me to see the person of Jesus living with me and in me. May I follow His will instead of demanding that He must follow my agenda. And as You open my eyes, please help me to pray for those whose spiritual sight is poor, and yet be encouraged by those who are following You more closely. Please transform my heart so that I have a bigger appetite for worship and a deeper hunger for seeing things from Your point of view. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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LEARNING OBEDIENCE

Luke 2:51-52 *Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Learning is different to both teaching and understanding. The person who has learned something is able to demonstrate that the teaching has been understood, by taking the appropriate action. [Hebrews 5:8](#) says that principle also applied to Jesus, "Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from what He suffered". That did not mean that Jesus was ignorant of His mission to die on the cross; but that until He had done it, He had not 'learned' what He knew.

Jesus had just demonstrated, in the temple ([Luke 2:41-50](#)), that He knew He was the unique Son of Father God. He understood what God's law meant, even teaching it with the use of probing questions, to open up the truth to the theological professors. The episode also re-taught Mary and Joseph that Jesus was not just a gifted child but the 'Son of the Most High', as the angel had prophesied ([Luke 1:32](#)); and therefore they were freshly alerted to their responsibilities as guardians of the Saviour. So they all went back to Nazareth to continue learning by taking the appropriate actions.

Jesus continued to obey [Exodus 20:12](#) "Honour your father and your mother". Mary practised [Deuteronomy 6:5](#) "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." For Mary, the most appropriate first action, following all she had been taught, was to treasure all of God's teaching: by remembering, bringing to mind, meditating and praying - so that she would be ready to continue to be God's servant ([Luke 1:38](#)) ready to work with Jesus and not against Him at the critical moments.

Jesus' obedience was in taking the form of a servant ([Phil 2:7](#)); not only God's servant, but also being obedient to Mary and Joseph in the home and carpentry business. What amazing humility! But it was not beneath His dignity. Jesus kept on putting God's Word into practice; because that is the purpose of God's communications. He intends that those who hear will take action. And Christ is our example. Listening to many sermons may inform the mind but their objective is not achieved until we take appropriate action. Even Word@Work has its limits if we do nothing. So, if you know what God wants you to do, do it! What can you do with truth which appears to have no immediate application? Treasure it, meditate on it and pray that the Lord will open His route for action. Perhaps we should remember what Mary said when Jesus did His first miracle, "Do whatever He tells you." ([John 2:5](#)).

Prayer: *Dear Lord God. Thank You for the nature of Your communication which is always true and always calls for action. Please forgive me for ignoring Your voice at times in the past, and help me to be ready to act when your command is immediate, and to treasure every Word, storing it up for the future. Help me to keep bringing Your Word back to my mind in meditation and prayer until the moment when You call me to take action. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

NON-FICTION GOSPEL

Luke 3:1-3 *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar--when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene-- during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Why should anybody, seeking truth, read a catalogue of ancient names? Luke wanted to find and transmit facts about Jesus ([Luke 1:1-4](#)). All true events take place at a specific time in a specific place. So, Luke's attention of historical detail is useful to refute those who falsely claim that the Bible is not true. Many of the characters in Luke's book were still alive when it was published; if it were not true they could say so.

Also, these verses tell us when John's ministry started - AD29 which was the 15th year of the Emperor Tiberius's rule. The whole of the Roman Empire would have known that. Pontius Pilate ruled the southern part of Israel from AD26-36. Herod Antipas was in control of Galilee from 2BC to AD34, and his brother, Philip, ruled the east side of the Jordan 4BC-34AD. Devout Jews would have known that. And for Jews scattered far and wide by persecution, they would know that Annas and Caiaphas were regarded as equal high priests during that time.

Having secured the date for all his readers, Luke introduced John again: no longer a baby, but now a man of God. He was a son of a priest but his calling was to announce the arrival of Jesus. He did that by commanding people to repent of their sins; and to confess publically in baptism. It was as if Jews were being asked to admit that their hearts were as wicked as the ungodly; for whom baptism was the point of acceptance into the faith of Israel, renouncing a godless way of life. The baptised people then committed themselves to love and serve the Lord Almighty and be open to receive the Saviour of the world.

Repentance has never been fashionable; but it is always essential. We can only find peace with God if we admit our rebellion against Him, and welcome Jesus as our Saviour (see www.crosscheck.org.uk to know more). As John was to find out, it was a costly message, for which his head would be cut off. But there is no better message to get us ready to meet Jesus. It is not good people who enter His heaven (there are no 100% good people), but bad people who admit it and ask for salvation by the blood of Christ. So if you are asked how to be right with God, tell them it starts with repentance. And if you are troubled in your soul, remember [2 Cor. 7:10](#): "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." If you think that God will not save wicked people, remember [Luke 5:32](#): "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Repentance levels the 'playing field' so that everybody who chooses to humble themselves can be saved!

Prayer: *Most Merciful God. I am ashamed to think that I often forget that I am a sinner, and presume of Your grace rather than admitting my sin. Please forgive me for all those symptoms of my proud heart, and for the rebellious self-assertion which lies behind it. I know that Jesus is Lord of all and therefore has the right to demand my obedience. Please help me to learn a different way of living, choosing to humble myself under Your mighty hand. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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STRAIGHT FORWARD SALVATION

Luke 3:4-6 *As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation.'" (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

John the Baptist was on a mission. It was not his idea; there was no self-interest in pursuing a long-cherished ambition. God was in control. So, before Luke narrates what John did, he tells us why he did it. 700 years previously, Isaiah the prophet had written about a person who would announce God's Messiah; he would preach the need to get all the obstacles out of the way so that the Saviour would be welcomed. That was John's divine appointment.

John's ministry was in calling people to repentance, to grieve over their personal rebellion towards God and their proud arrogance - and even their self-righteousness in their religion. These are the real obstacles to the ministry of Jesus in the world today, as well. Whether it is the high places of idol worship or the low places of grumbling, or depraved thinking and behaviour; or the deviant nature of human sinfulness or the rough world of pragmatic survival - all these need to be dealt with so that the King of kings can be welcomed. In the same way in which workmen travelled ahead of an eastern king, mending the road so that he could travel safely and speedily, Isaiah predicted that God would send his workman to call people to repentance. Only repentance, of everything that opposes God, will make a satisfactory road for the Lord.

God still works in exactly the same way. Nobody can receive Jesus as Saviour and Lord if they are committed to themselves or a false worship. So the first thing to do, when we feel far from God, is to say, "Lord, please show me who or what I have been worshipping, and putting in place of You". There is an easy test: whatever/whoever you spend your time, thought or energy on - that is your idol! The Lord of all will not come back into the centre of your life until idols are renounced: but when repentance is willingly offered, the road of your heart is ready for the Lord.

Prayer: *Holy God, who can not tolerate the presence of sin. Please forgive me for so often choosing to worship idols and setting my affection on what You hate. I do want to be free from these obstacles which prevent my relationship with You. Give me an insight into the wrong way I have seen You and failed to welcome You as I should. Please also help me to announce Your love and grace to my friends and colleagues, that they too may want to surrender themselves to Your holy and pure love. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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WELCOMING WARNING

Luke 3:7-8 *John said to the crowds coming out to be baptised by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

John the Baptist might not have been appreciated as a visiting preacher today. There is no evidence of any universal smile and warm handshake to affirm all who came to his meetings. Today's passage shows the opposite of the caricatured 'please everybody' pastor. Far from making everybody feel good after their dusty trek to the baptismal site, he appears to rebuke them. Instead of offering soft soothing words of comfort, John calls them snakes in the grass - the undercover agents of evil.

John's commission was not to be a travelling entertainer but an evangelist. All true evangelism announces the good news ('gospel') of God's salvation, but saving grace has no context without proclaiming the awesome reality of God's wrath against sinners. And there is no neat religious 'fix' to make the holy God overlook our sin. Even baptism or church membership cannot be used to charm God, although many still think it can.

God is looking for repentance. He wants to see that we are genuinely ashamed of all that offends Him. Repentance is not a formula of words but a change of heart: its authenticity is seen in a changed lifestyle. So John demanded that those who came for baptism showed evidence that they understood the seriousness of their sin, and had a real hunger for righteousness. He was not impressed by religious credentials or family pedigree. If repentance was not real, salvation was meaningless.

However long you may have known of the grace of God, you can still be an agent for evil if you do not place every rebellion and proud self-assertion at the foot of the cross of Christ. Do not make the false assumption that religious rituals can get you right with God if your heart is still against what He loves, or loves what He hates. But when true repentance becomes a part of daily lifestyle, baptism is God's chosen way of celebrating the cleansing which comes with salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. So, the message is 'get real!!' God is not fooled; so clean up and then get going with Jesus!

Prayer: *Dear Lord. Thank You for being so clear about my responsibility to get right with You through repentance and faith. Thank You for Your grace in leading me to that point, and then providing the sustaining grace to keep going in faith and repentance so that I can stay on track with Jesus every day. In His Name. Amen.*

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