

Our Certain Salvation

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[0 : 00] Right, I'd like everybody to pick up your Bibles and to open them. And boys and girls, if you pick up a Bible too, make sure you have your finger in the right page.

If you turn to page 855 to begin with, and just have it open there, we're going to read a little bit at the beginning of Luke's Gospel. But first of all, since it is Christmas, or nearly so Christmas, we've still got our Christmas tree, so this tree is looking healthier than the one on Bass Street, isn't it? The one on Bass Street was looking quite droopy this morning. This one's still looking quite good. So since it's still the Christmas season, I thought we would have a bit of a Christmas quiz this evening to start with.

So I want you to, and I'm a bit worried some of you have had too much Christmas pudding, you might be slumbering away and going into the land of non, so I'm going to wake you up with some questions. So, first of all, this is a question I think for, we'll start with the boys and girls first, to see if anybody knows the answer to this.

In our Bibles, there's lots of books, aren't there? There's lots of books in the Bible. Can anybody tell me how many books there are in the Bible? Yes. Two?

[1 : 10] Well, alright, there's the Old Testament and the New Testament, fair enough. But there's lots of books that made that up, so how many? Sixty-six. Is that right or wrong?

It's right, isn't it? Some of them are not too sure. You're correct, sixty-six. Okay, here's a more difficult question. There's one writer of the Bible, because God wrote the Bible, didn't he, through the Holy Spirit, but he used lots of people to write the Bible.

How many different writers? It's too difficult to do the whole Bible. Let's stick to the New Testament.

How many writers, human writers, are there of the New Testament?

Can anybody tell me that? Yes, again. How many? Nine. Thirty-nine.

No, that's too many. There's thirty-nine books in the Old Testament, and there are twenty-seven books in the New Testament, aren't there? But there's not as many writers. How many writers in the New Testament?

[2 : 15] Anybody? Does anybody know? Joe Skelter's better stop cheating. Twenty-one.

Twenty-one? No, that's too many. Eight. Eight. That is certainly one very good answer. I would accept eight or nine. Let's try and name them, shall we?

Let's try and name them. Matthew. Mark. Luke. And John. That's four. Who else? Paul. That's five. Peter.

James. Jude. Jude. That's eight. And the author of Hebrews. Hebrews. Now, nobody really knows. Might be the Apostle Paul.

Might be one of the others. Might be somebody different. So, eight or nine. For my money, I think probably it was the Apostle Paul. But anyway. Eight or nine, I'll accept. All right. Good. Here's another question.

[3 : 13] Who do you think wrote more of the New Testament than any of those, than anybody else? Which of those, eight or nine, wrote the most of the New Testament?

Somebody said Paul? Somebody said Luke? Luke. What do you think? You think Luke. Who thinks it was Luke? Who thinks it was the Apostle Paul?

Who thinks it was somebody else? Well, it was in fact Luke. Because Luke wrote, how many books did Luke write?

Two. Luke and Acts. And if you add all that up together, there's more in that than there is in all Paul's letters put together. If you count the number of verses and the number of lines of letters.

I think that's right anyway. Somebody can probably read through every single word this week and come back and tell me next week that was wrong. But I think that's right. It's surprising actually, isn't

it, that we can read any of what Luke wrote.

[4 : 18] Because Luke had a particular profession that's quite famous for having bad handwriting. Anybody know what it was that Luke did? He was a doctor, wasn't he?

Doctors are supposed to have bad handwriting. I don't believe that's true at all. But I've never known a doctor with bad handwriting. But Luke was a doctor. How do we know Luke was a doctor, by the way? Does anybody know?

Where in the Bible are we told that Luke was a doctor? That's a tricky one. Can anybody guess? It's in one of Paul's letters. Anybody know? Colossians 4 verse 4. The beloved physician, Luke. There are two other places in the New Testament Luke is mentioned by name. Outside of Acts where he mentions himself. Anybody think where those are? One place that tells us that Luke was a very loyal colleague of Paul's.

[5 : 21] When other people weren't being so loyal. 2 Timothy. Yeah, 2 Timothy chapter 4. Where everybody else had deserted him. Luke only is with me, he said.

And there's one other place where he's mentioned. And that's in the book of Philemon. Philemon verse 24. Where Paul calls him his fellow worker. So he wrote the substantial part of the New Testament.

He was very loyal to the Apostle Paul. And he was a fellow worker of the Gospel. So that's Luke. Can anybody tell me what date in the church calendar is the Feast of St. Luke?

I'm looking around for some Anglicans here. Because you're the people who might know this. Joe, can you remember? No? It's October the 18th.

So file that away for your next biblical trivial pursuit. Right, okay. That's enough about Luke. I want to think a little bit about Luke's book. And we'll come to that handout that you have on your seat in a little bit.

[6 : 25] But I want us to think about Luke's book. I said he wrote two books or it's one book in two parts. Luke and Acts. It would be handier in our Bible if Luke was the last Gospel and then Acts came after because we would be together.

But can anybody remember what you might call the hinge point? The middle point of Luke's writing. What happens at the very end of Luke's Gospel? And what does he talk about again at the very beginning of the book of Acts?

Anybody know? Yes, the ascension of Jesus, isn't it? The resurrection and his ascending to glory. That's where Luke's Gospel ends and that's where Acts begins.

And it's like a pivot point really in the book because remember at the beginning of Acts Luke says, in my first book I wrote about everything that Jesus began to do.

And the implication then is that in his second book, Acts he's writing about what Jesus continued to do after he descended. So Luke is about the work Jesus began before he ascended to heaven and Acts is about what he continued to do through his Holy Spirit after he descended to the Father.

[7 : 41] But why? Here's a question. Why did Luke write this account? And why did he write it that way? In two parts. And why did he include all the things he included and leave out the things he left out?

He doesn't include everything about the story of Jesus' birth, does he? Does Luke tell us about the birth of John the Baptist? Who thinks he does?

Hands up. Who thinks he doesn't? Most of you haven't really read Luke's Gospel, have you? Of course he tells us about the birth of John the Baptist. Don't be so silly.

Does he tell us about the angel coming to speak to Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, in the temple? Yes. Of course he does. Does he tell us about the angel coming to Mary?

Yes. Does he tell us about the angel coming to Joseph? No. Who tells us about that? Only Matthew.

[8 : 41] Why doesn't Luke tell us about that, I wonder? Do you think he didn't know? Does he tell us about the journey to Bethlehem of Mary and Joseph?

Yes. Yes he does. Does he tell us about the shepherds? Yes. We know that. He tells us about the shepherds. Does he tell us about the wise men? Yes. Does he tell us about the wise men?

Who tells us about the wise men? Matthew. So Luke doesn't tell us everything, does he? Neither does Matthew. I think he knew all these things, but he decided to write the things he wrote very specially because he had a particular purpose in writing what he was writing.

Let's read from the very beginning of Luke's gospel. Look at Luke chapter 1 verses 1 to 4 because in these little bits, right in the beginning, the good thing is Luke tells us exactly why he wrote both his books.

This is what he says. Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished or been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you've been taught.

[10:17] Why did Luke write his book? So that Theophilus and others would have certainty.

Certainty about things that they've been taught. were they already Christians but beginning to doubt perhaps that some of what they've been told was true? Very possibly.

Maybe Theophilus and some of the others weren't yet Christians but were exploring and looking into it and wondering whether they really could believe what they've been told. If it was either of those things or both for some people, that's what Luke was writing about.

What did he want them to have certainty about the things that they've been taught? And the things that they've been taught was all about salvation for the world.

That's one of Luke's big, big themes all the way through his gospel. He talks again and again about salvation. When you get to the very end of the book of Acts, we're listening to Paul in Rome at the center of the world going on telling that God's salvation was going to the Gentiles to the very ends of the earth and preaching about the kingdom of God.

[11:30] So he wanted people to be certain of God's salvation coming to all the world. And he wanted them to be certain that that was coming through Jesus who was to be the saviour of the whole world.

That's why it begins at the beginning of his gospel with the arrival of the saviour. He talks about Mary rejoicing in God our saviour. He talks about Zechariah in his song rejoicing in the God who has brought salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.

And so Luke is writing to give certainty about salvation and about the saviour of the world. I would summarise Luke's method if you like with three D's.

Luke documents. That means he's a historian. He gives us lots of facts. He records all that happened and he tells us their meaning. So in verse 2 he says he spoke to the eyewitnesses, people who saw these things firsthand.

And in verse 3 he says he looked at everything closely for some time and then he wrote a very orderly account. So he documents clearly the things that happened, the truth about Jesus.

[12:45] But also he defends. He's an apologist. That is, he's arguing for the truth of what has been promised in scripture and telling us that it has been accomplished, it has been fulfilled.

And he's defending the integrity of the Christian message, especially in the Roman world, especially among many Romans who were sceptical. That's why when you read through Luke's gospel more than any of the others, he talks a lot about Romans.

There's centurions who pitch up, like the centurion in Luke chapter 7. There's Cornelius in Acts chapter 10 who Peter goes and speaks to this. Theophilus who he's writing to is very probably a Roman.

And all the Romans have a very good impression of Jesus and they have a good impression of the apostles. And so Paul is saying this is not some crazy sect.

These are people of integrity, people of faith, people who do no harm to the empire but have much, much to give to the empire. So he's documenting as a historian, he's defending as an apologist but above all he is declaring because Luke is an evangelist and he's telling us good news all the time.

[13:55] Good news about salvation that's being brought to the whole world through Jesus the Saviour. And there's lots of places where Luke includes verses about salvation where some of the other writers perhaps miss them out.

So in Luke chapter 3 when Luke's quoting from Isaiah he goes on and quotes something that Matthew and Mark leave out where Isaiah says then all flesh shall see the salvation of our God. Every time there's a chance to throw in a quotation about salvation you'll find that Luke is doing it because that's what he's so concerned about. So if you look at my sheet there on your chairs on the first page at the top it says our certain salvation.

Here's my summary of Luke's gospel why he writes Luke sets out to document defend and declare the good news of Jesus both fulfilled on earth in person that's in Luke's gospel and from heaven by his spirit and that's the book of Acts so that it continues to be believed in and declared to all nations until Jesus returns and all of that with great certainty.

So it's good to ask yourself whenever you're reading a bit in Luke's gospel or in the Acts of the Apostles whenever you're reading Luke it's good to say to yourself what is he documenting what is he defending what is he declaring here what does he want me to be certain about as I'm reading this passage of scripture that's a good question to ask every time you pick up Luke's gospel and read it.

[15 : 36] Well look let's read a little bit of Luke's gospel now in chapter 2 turn over the page to page 857 we're going to read chapter 2 verses 1 to 7 then we're going to sing and then we'll read another bit but just think about that what is he documented what's he defending what's he declaring to us what is Luke wanting us to be certain about by the way he writes this by what he includes in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered this was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria there's a historical note there and all went to be registered each to his own time Joseph also went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea to the city of David which is called Bethlehem because he was of the house and lineage of David to be registered with Mary his betrothed who was with child when they were there the time came for her to give birth she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn okay let's read on and starting at Luke 2 and verse 8 page 857 there was no place for them in the inn but in the same region there were shepherds in the field keeping watch over their flock one night and an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone round them and they were filled with fear and the angel said to them fear not for behold

I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people for unto you is born this day in the city of David a saviour who is Christ the Lord and this will be a sign for you you will find the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host the armies of God praising God and saying glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is well pleased and the angels went away from them into heaven the shepherds said to one another let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us and they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger and when they saw it they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child and all who heard it wondered marveled at what the shepherds told them and Mary treasured up all these things pondering them in her heart and the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them at the end of eight days when he was circumcised he was called

Jesus the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb Amen do pick up your Bibles if you would and open them again to page 857 Luke chapter 2 we'll come to that in a minute and have a look again just at the first page of the little handout that I've given you there at the top there is I think the purpose of Luke's writing as we've seen but it helps us I think to get to get the big picture of how Luke has put his gospel together so there's just a couple of things here to help us the whole gospel of Luke I think when you read through it as we should all read through it in one it's good to stop and study little bits but most books we read from the beginning to the end don't we just read a bit here and then a week later read another bit there we actually read the whole story and get the focus of it when you do that with Luke's gospel you quite quickly get the impression very clearly that it falls into two halves the first nine chapters and a bit up to chapter 9 verse 50 which are all about the revelation of God's glory and then from that point onwards it's very much a story of a journey and the journey is the road to God's glory the first half reveals the Saviour who has come down from heaven to show us the full revelation of God himself and the second half of the book is the Lord Jesus the God come down from heaven teaching us the way to join him in glory the road to glory and both halves of the book begin with Jesus being rejected we're very familiar with the birth stories and the clear rejection we just read it there was no room for Jesus in the end and nevertheless he comes to the end of Luke chapter 9 that section of his gospel and this one for whom there was no room when he was born on earth is transfigured in glory in the mount of transfiguration and seen for who he truly is by his disciples but then Jesus goes through the territory of the Samaritans and immediately he's rejected by them because he had set a space

towards Jerusalem and the journey to the cross and it's a story of a road a long road of rejection and of hatred and of scorn that ends well not with his cross but through his cross his resurrection and his ascension ends with the Lord Jesus raised up again into glory two very different halves the revelation of God's glory to earth and the incarnation showing us

God in the flesh Jesus and his words and works and then the road to glory a road of suffering and the shadow of the cross and that's the two halves of Luke's gospel and so when you read the beginning of Luke's gospel Luke chapter 1 and 2 I think it's like what in music would be called an overture the beginning of an opera has an overture those of you who are opera buffs if you're more into West End musicals think of Les Miserables for example or things like that you have that beginning of the music and little bits of tune come in there and little other bits of tune come in there and you have a few minutes of all these little bits of tunes and then all the way through the rest of the story those little tunes keep recurring and coming back in and it's there to whet your appetite and give you a taste so when you come to the rest of the story you say that sounds familiar well that's exactly what Luke's doing at the beginning of his gospel he's telling us what he's going to tell us so that later when he tells us we think oh that sounds very familiar it's just a good way of teaching isn't it

[22 : 59] I had a pharmacology lecture at university he began every single lecture the same way he said tell them what you're going to tell them tell them and then tell them what you told them you can tell where he was from it wasn't from Aberdeen so that's what he did so he said this is what I'm going to tell you now I'm telling you and then at the end I'm telling you what I've told you and it was pretty effective really he usually had the hang of it by the end of the end of the lecture well Luke is telling us what he's going to tell us and so if you look there at the bottom half of the sheet I'm saying Luke's first two chapters give us the story in miniature it's like an overture and chapter one therefore is full of the joy of the incarnation the joy of the response of the people who see at last and hear God revealed from heaven in the human flesh the joy in the coming of Jesus but in chapter two we have something rather different we have the shadows that are beginning to form shadows of a darker message that surrounds the joy of Jesus' birth shadows indeed of the cross the suffering of Jesus that is to come so even in Luke's beginning where he's telling us about the birth of Jesus even over the cradle of the Redeemer which brings the sunrise of light for the world that all these songs are singing about even there the shadows of the cross are already gathering and that's what so many of our

Christmas carols makes clear it's what some of the great paintings of religious art make clear I've often mentioned Rembrandt's painting called The Shadow the what's it called The Adoration of the Shepherds there's a version of it in the National Gallery in London although it's probably not the original one actually it's probably a copy by one of his disciples they discovered that later but it's not worth quite as much as it would have been if it was the original but that's a wonderful painting if you know it it's a picture of the stable scene and typical of Rembrandt's art he makes a great deal of the light and the light in this stable scene is all emanating from the manger and from the person of Jesus so the whole scene is lit up from the middle and the light that shines on the faces of Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and others is not coming from lanterns it's coming from the light of the world but in the back of the stable there's beams lying against the wall and the shadow cast by those beams from the light that's coming from the Saviour forms subtly in the back of the stable a shape of a cross and that's

Rembrandt the painter's good theology coming through he's expressing there what Luke is expressing in the beginning of his gospel that even over the birth of Jesus the shadow of the Saviour's suffering is in evidence and that's what shapes the first two chapters here of Luke's gospel it's no accident what you have in these first two chapters there's a ten little stories about the birth of Jesus very carefully shaped if you turn over the page on the handout there I'm calling it a carefully shaped overture of songs and shadows and I've set it out there to show you just how carefully Luke has expressed this there are ten stories there's a single story at the beginning and a single story at the end and they're set in the temple there's Zechariah in the temple at the beginning and he's deaf to God's living word breaking into the temple the end of chapter two what do we have a very different scene

Jesus the son of God in the temple speaking forth the living word of God and teaching the scribes and the Pharisees the deadness of the old way and the wonderful life of the living Lord himself come to the temple but in between that there there are pairs of stories eight stories in four pairs and

they match each other so you have two stories in chapter one speaking of Mary's joy Mary and Gabriel and then Mary and Elizabeth and these words that come from God elicit the wonderful songs of salvation that we know so well but if you look in chapter two in verse 22 to 40 you see again two stories Mary and Joseph in the temple first with the words from Selene and then the words from Anna and these words don't bring joy they bring anguish and confusion these are the things that Mary is pondering in her heart and then the two centre stories centre on these two births first of all the two stories about

John's birth John who is welcomed amidst family and friends in his birth and his birth brings great joy on earth and his father sings of joy but then how different is the birth of Jesus the story we read in verses 1 to 7 of chapter 2 Jesus is born not amidst friends and family but outcast on earth and yet this second story speaks of there being joy nevertheless not joy on earth earth hardly noticed the birth of Jesus but there was joy in the heavens the whole of the heavenly host singing great joy in Jesus Christ so this is a very carefully ordered account you might think it's accidental but it's not at all it's very carefully patterned Luke tells us doesn't he he wrote a carefully ordered account so we can't be that surprised that he does this he means us to see it there's lots of other things too last verse of chapter one speaks about Jesus growing and becoming strong in spirit and so on sorry [29:00] John the Baptist growing and so on and chapter two ends with Jesus likewise growing in stature and favour with God and man it's very careful it's very deliberate and all of it is to show that the light of God's revelation and the darkness that surrounds his work of redemption that they are quite inseparable they belong together that we can't think of the wonder of Jesus' birth without also having to think of the terrible wonder of Jesus' death and what he came to do so when you see Luke's big purpose in writing when you see the shape of his whole book the big picture when you get a sense of his method his pattern how he's putting it together that helps us to get the message when we read any particular section like the bit we read in verses 1-21 of chapter 2 it helps us to understand his thinking of what he might be wanting us to be certain about and of course as we look at each passage in detail we have to ask this sort of question what has he carefully chosen to include here how has he constructed this account carefully as he says he has to make us certain of something why is he written it exactly the way he has so here in chapter 2 as I said we've got sort of three sections two pairs and then the final section in the temple but each of these sections

I wonder if you were looking during the offering each of them comes to a focus in the message that's brought to Mary and her reaction to that did you see that so verses 18 and 19 here the angels bring a message to Mary it's carried through the shepherds but Mary treasures these things and ponders them in her heart verse 18 and 19 then in the temple Mary and Joseph also get a message don't they from Simeon and then from Anna in verse 33 and likewise what they're told makes them wonder when they hear this rather piercing truth that Mary and Joseph are told about what would happen to Jesus and what would happen to her a sword piercing her own soul through what he was coming into the world to do and then finally in that last section we look at verse 51 it's Jesus himself isn't it when he's 12 years old in the temple and they come back looking for him and it's Jesus himself who gives the message from God to Mary and the message is why are you surprised that I'm about my father's business this is what I've come here to do and once again verse 51 Mary treasured up all these things in her heart that's no accident is it we just carefully ordered this we're supposed to notice that they're like signposts and we're meant to ask aren't we what is the message to Mary that she was to learn and what's the message therefore that we're to learn to make us certain so that we treasure up these things in our heart and it strengthens our faith so when we read verses 1 to 21 as we did we're to ask those sorts of questions so let's look just very briefly at these two sections in turn let's try and see how they relate to each other they clearly form a pair we should expect them to relate to each other because they do and if as I've suggested the key point in this whole chapter is Mary's reaction to the message that she gets to what she's pondering and we might expect Mary to be the focus it's obviously the focus isn't it in verses 8 to 21 we should expect probably that Mary is then the focus in verses 1 to 7 as well and I want to suggest that these verses do focus on

Mary and they show us what I think must have been great anguish from Mary that's my summary of verses 1 to 7 great anguish from Mary now that might not seem obvious to us we're so used to hearing these words in a candlelit church where we sing carols and have all those nice feelings at Christmas the problem is because of that we're sometimes missing the real point of these verses we're missing the misery that fills these verses I don't know if any of you have seen or in the past

the nativity film that the BBC produced a few years ago did any of you see that I bought the DVD and we watch it every Christmas it's one of the very few decent things the BBC have ever done about Christmas it's never been back on again I think it was far too good for that that's the problem but let me commend it to you because it really does capture the misery of Mary in this whole episode of becoming the one who was to bear the Messiah here in chapter 2 verses 1 to 7 it's a very different picture to all the joy surrounding chapter 1 gone is all that joy and excitement of Mary's rushing off to Elizabeth

Mary's singing her Magnificat Mary's response to the angel what has happened in between well there's been nine months hasn't there of pregnancy you might think well that's a happy time pregnancy I don't think it was a happy time at all in that sense for Mary a teenage girl first century Israel an unmarried mother how many people do you think in Nazareth really believe the story that oh yes I'm a virgin and an angel has told me that I've conceived of the Holy Spirit you really think that that's the sort of thing that you would believe if somebody came and told that to you I think it must have been very very hard indeed for Mary I think she was surrounded by a lot of shame a lot of rejection and we know that that's true because Matthew's gospel tells us doesn't it that Joseph wanted to divorce her he was a decent man so he wanted to do it quietly he didn't want her to be stoned in public for adultery which was the obvious conclusion that any sane person would have of what had happened but he wanted to get rid of her and you might ask the question well how long did

[35 : 36] Joseph misunderstand the situation how long did Joseph feel utterly betrayed perhaps full of bitterness and hatred for his betrothed wife before the angel came and appeared to him we're not told are we in the scriptures we're not told how long that was in that BBC dramatisation it leaves a long long delay and it only happens when Joseph is almost at Bethlehem was Mary and that might very well be the case I think we're to understand that there was a great rift in their relationship for a long period perhaps Mary was the only one who had to bear that burden all on her own just think about that and then regardless of that there was this terrible long journey off to Bethlehem with Joseph far far away from friends from family from anybody else and then going into labour all alone with a carpenter as your midwife that's not really what most ladies I think would particularly think was a very happy situation and there was no room for them in the inn now you read those words and you tend to think oh well

Bethlehem must have been full of people for the census it was just full and a nice kindly innkeeper said oh but you can go in the stable you notice actually in the story there's no mention of any innkeeper no mention of any stable we're just told flatly there was no room for them in the inn I think it's very likely there was no room for them in the inn because they didn't want the shame of having this notorious couple unmarried couple in amongst all the decent people who were in that inn so the fact that Jesus was born and laid in a manger is not a lovely romantic touch to give us a nice scene on our Christmas cards it's really telling us this was a miserable awful situation he was stuck in a cattle trough in a filthy stinking by surrounded by manure and excrement and animals this is the birth of an outcast now what do you think

Mary his mother was thinking when all of this was transpiring I very strongly suspect that what she was thinking was this all that angelic visitation stuff all that that I thought I believed about God coming to me and the baby being born as a saviour I must have been deluded I must have been mad look at me now my life is nearly falling apart look what's happening how can it possibly be true as the angel said where are all these angels where are all these heavenly hosts I'm looking around and all I'm seeing is toil and stress and misery and my life falling apart and nothing happening the way it seemed that God was telling me it was going to happen it's quite common isn't it for us to think like that in our lives when we believe and trust in Jesus we've trusted the gospel we've believed

God's word all that he's promised but so often as life goes on it just doesn't seem to fit all that well with the reality of life as it's actually unfolding before us we've got promises of joy and peace promises of resurrection life promises of an end to sin and evil and all of these things and we look around and what do we see not that and I think Mary was most likely thinking what on earth is going on how can this really be true how can I possibly be giving birth to the son of God in a state like this but notice Luke gives us some hints doesn't he in his story in verses 1 to 7 that God hasn't actually vanished out of the picture look at verse 4 where are they going to the city of

David remember what the angel had spoken about in chapter 1 the son you will give birth to will be in the line of David you will reign on the throne of David forever and ever but maybe Mary was just too discouraged too upset too miserable to really understand to remember all of that and I think that is why in his great mercy and his kindness God sent Mary this wonderful message he sent her a very particular message to encourage her and to reassure her and verses 1 to 7 are very short aren't they just 7 short verses to describe the birth of Jesus but then we get verses 14 to 21 twice as many verses to actually explain what was going on and what the birth of Jesus was really about and into Mary's great anguish these verses tell us of a message of great assurance for Mary and I think that's why this story is recorded why it's here why it happened in the first place yes why all this stuff about all the shepherds and angels appearing to well

[41 : 05] I'm sure it is and we're told but it was to bless them to tell them of a saviour who was coming even for people like them for all the people bringing good news of forgiveness of sins for salvation peace with God verse 11 unto you is born this day a saviour but if we're to look at Luke's writing and what his focus is where the climax comes I think we're to see that he wants us to see that this is a message from God especially for Mary in all her anguish and her pain and her confusion and diet about what is going on she must have been thinking how can I be giving birth to the king of kings to the messiah to the one who's going to be the son of God how can that be happening in a place like this far from home rejected by the world relegated to the smelly outhouse with the animals how can the birth of the king of kings in this fit you can't believe that she couldn't be thinking that but here's a message that comes right into her darkness and brings great reassurance because it says to

Mary it's not how it seems this birth isn't unnoticed and forgotten the whole of heaven is singing and dancing for joy at this birth that has just happened angels are rejoicing because they know what it means God is glorifying himself God is bringing his saving peace into this world of sin everything that you've been told everything that you heard it is true and it's being fulfilled imagine what that must have meant to her when she treasured it up in her heart a wonderful assurance it was that the shepherds brought that message from the angels because what it said to her was that yes God can be trusted even when a long time goes by looks like he's abandoned here nothing is going to happen like he said it would he is real and God's word is real and it doesn't fail and you can trust his word

I like to imagine Mary telling the story years later to Luke when Luke was researching carefully all his words we know that Luke spent a long time in Palestine we know that he researched I think very lightly he spoke to Mary herself how could he have had so many of these details if he hadn't had first hand eyewitness accounts I like to imagine Mary and Luke sitting and having a cup of tea together and Luke saying we're just trying to remember and tell me all about what happened and she gets to this bed and says you know I was absolutely in the pit of despair it was the lowest of the low and there was my baby in this cattle trough and I thought things can't get any worse and then all of a sudden the door opened and this whole bunch of stinking ugly shepherds came right rushing in and I thought this is absolutely the last straw what could get possibly worse than this and then and then they told me all that had happened to them the angels and their message and you know those stinking shepherds it was just like they themselves were angels come right into that fire and bringing me a word from God himself that I wasn't mad that I wasn't abandoned that actually everything God had said was true their words they made all the difference and through their words I knew that God could be trusted now what does Luke want his readers to be certain about I think he wants us to be certain that very often although it looks to us like the coming of God's saving power into this world is surrounded by nothing but struggle and difficulty and distress nevertheless although that is the case even when things look as if they're going desperately wrong to us absolutely nothing no detail lies out with the plan and purpose of God and so we can have peace we can be at peace and trust his word he is in control and heaven's view of all of these things is utterly different from the view on planet earth and we can trust the message of heaven and the message of the messengers who bring the word of God from heaven to tell us the word of truth we can trust what they see even in the face of what it seems that we can see with our own eyes things and I think that's a great assurance not only that

Mary needed most certainly then but that all of us need very often in our lives isn't it to be reminded that heaven's view of things is so very different from the view of earth so much clearer than our earthbound eyes can ever see things but God has sent us the viewpoint of heaven hasn't he in his

gospel word so that we can be at peace even when it looks to us that things are far from going according to plan and things seem completely out of control he's given us a word that we can grasp all of and trust and it's his pattern isn't it what does Paul say in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 God chose what is weak and despised in the world even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are so that no human being may boast in the sight of God and that's a great lesson to learn it's a great lesson to ponder in our hearts just as Mary pondered that very same lesson in hers to treasure in our hearts whatever happens in this coming year in 2017 whatever unfolds in our personal lives in our church life in national life in the world yes there may be real anguish ahead for our life the Bible doesn't airbrush that away it doesn't pretend there may be real anguish for some of us in 2017 but there is always also real assurance

[47 : 53] God is on the throne and his purpose is being worked out and will be worked out and so whatever befalls we can be at peace there is glory to God in the highest there is through Jesus Christ peace for those with whom he is well pleased and of that we can be absolutely certain and that's the prescription that the good doctor Luke has for us as we begin this coming year we can be certain because we have the great assurance of even a better word than Mary received from those angels we have assurance not just of a Christ who has been born to reveal the father to us but a Christ who has died and risen and is ascended to the right hand of the father to bring redemption to us to reconcile us with him now to reunite us with him in resurrection bodies on the day he comes of that we can be certain however it might look on earth in the darkness the difficult days in the travails of bodies that will be a year older at the end of next year than they are now and a year weaker of that we can be certain so let's ponder that in our minds and our hearts in this coming year and let's give thanks to God for the shepherds and for the angels message and for all that it tells to us too let's pray heavenly father we thank you that your word is so faithful and truthful and because it is it is so encouraging to us we thank you for your kindness and mercy to mary in that time of great travel and anguish we thank you for all your kindness and mercy to us in your words which give us hope so fill our hearts we pray lord with trust in you and with love for you for jesus sake amen may