



A Rags to Riches Story

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Luke 4:14-22





RICH

The credit crunch

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

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

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



A rescue mission

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

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

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

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



RICH

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

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

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

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

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

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



A RAGS TO RICHES STORY

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

God's favour and my debt

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

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

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

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





RICH

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

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

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





A RAGS TO RICHES STORY

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

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

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





RICH

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

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

Luke's Gospel and this book

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

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





A RAGS TO RICHES STORY

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

Why does Luke think that Jesus can make us rich?

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

What do we have to do to get it?

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

Why should we believe Luke?

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





RICH

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

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

¹ Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke 1:1-4

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

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



A RAGS TO RICHES STORY

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

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

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

