

## **Saving For Christmas:**

### **Jesus is Savior Above All and For All (Lk. 2:1-14)**

**Chris Altrick – December 20, 2009**

This Friday most of us will celebrate Christmas, a day on which we mark the birth of Jesus. Author Max Lucado reflects on the many ways people view this Jesus whose birth Christmas celebrates.<sup>1</sup> Some, Lucado writes, see Jesus as the “Rabbit’s-Foot-Redeemer.” Jesus is a good-luck charm. The Rabbit’s-Foot-Redeemer’s specialty is getting you out of a jam. If you can’t find a parking space, just ask *him*. If you need help quickly, just pull him out. Others, Lucado writes, see Jesus as the “Aladdin’s-Lamp-Redeemer.” Whatever you wish is his command. He’ll give you new jobs, pink Cadillacs, and improved spouses. And when you’re done with him, he’ll go back into the lamp. Third, some view Jesus as a “Monty-Hall-Redeemer.” He’s ready to make a deal. If you will put on a coat and tie, or dress and hose, 52 Sundays a year and endure sermons and contributions, he’ll make sure you get the heavenly prize behind door number 3.

Lucado’s categories raise the larger question: How *should* we view Jesus? Just who *is* that infant in the manger? As add as it may seem to us, early Christians answered these questions with the image and Greek word for “fish.” The Greek word for “fish” was “ixthus.” Say that out loud with me: “ixthus,” “ixthus.” Each letter or pair of letters in the Greek word “ixthus” stood for one important view of Jesus.

- The “i” in “ixthus” stood for “iesous,” the Greek word for Jesus.
- The “x” in “ixthus” stood for “xristos,” the Greek word for Christ.
- The “th” in “ixthus” stood for “theou,” the Greek word meaning “of God” or “God’s.”
- The “u” in “ixthus” stood for “huios,” the Greek word for Son.
- And the “s” in “ixthus” stood for “soter,” the Greek word for Savior.

Together the image of the fish and the word for fish stood for “Jesus Christ God’s Son Savior.” That was one way early Christians summarized how they viewed Jesus. To them, Jesus was Christ, God’s Son, and Savior.

We find this last view, “Savior,” appearing prominently in Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth: *1In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 4And 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, 5to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. 8And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 10And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” 13And suddenly*

*there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Lk. 2:1-14 ESV).*

Listen once more for the word "Savior: *11For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. (Lk. 2:11 ESV).* The angel gives three titles to the infant Jesus: Lord, Christ, and Savior. We're reflecting this morning and next Sunday morning on the title "Savior." The Christmas angel wants us to view the infant Jesus as "Savior." And over these two Sundays we'll examine three components of Jesus as "Savior."

If we lived in the time of Jesus' birth, the word "Savior" would have been quite familiar. And the word wouldn't have necessarily just have been a word we heard in a Jewish or Christian worship service. Today, we almost only hear "Savior" when it's used in a Judeo-Christian worship service. But in Jesus' day, the word "Savior" was used in many contexts. In fact, *in Jesus' day there were many Saviors.* You could find politicians described as "Saviors." You could find philosophers described as "Saviors." Kings were often described with this word. Emperors were generally described with this word. And pagan gods were certainly described as "Savior."<sup>2</sup> In Jesus' day there were many Saviors.

But this word was especially used for people like kings and emperors. The Rosetta Stone, that multi-lingual stone which aided archeologists in translating ancient words, called the Egyptian ruler Ptolemy V Epiphanes "savior and god." An inscription found in Ephesus called the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar "god manifest and common savior of human life."<sup>3</sup> The Roman Emperor Nero would be called "savior and benefactor of the inhabited world."<sup>4</sup> In Jesus' day there were many Saviors. Kings and emperor were especially considered to be Saviors.

And in some ways even we look at political leaders as Saviors. The Internet is filled with references to top politicians as Saviors. One website asks of Sarah Palin, "Is This Really America? Can Sarah Palin Save it For Us?" There are numerous sites asking, "Can Barak Obama Save the Economy?" One site asks if John McCain can "Save" his party? We still tend to look at our nation's highest leaders as Saviors.

Given this tendency, especially in Jesus' day, it is no coincidence that Luke begins the story of Jesus' birth with words about an emperor, *the emperor, Caesar Augustus: 1In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.* Prior to this time, Augustus was one of three leaders empowered to rule Rome. Mark Antony and Markus Lepidus ruled the empire alongside Augustus. But soon Augustus became the sole ruler. His given name was Gaius Octavius. "Augustus" was a title bestowed upon him by the Roman senate.<sup>5</sup> Augustus was a particularly noteworthy Caesar because he had managed to put an end to civil strife in the Roman world. He brought peace to the empire. Because of this, during Augustus' reign, the Roman senate ordered that the doors to the Shrine of the god Janus, which normally stood open in times of war, be closed. The Senate erected an altar to Augustus which still stands in Rome today. And in the eastern Mediterranean, Augustus was hailed as "savior of the whole world." His birthday, Sept. 23, was celebrated with this inscription: "[the birthday] of the god has marked the beginning of the good news through him for the world."<sup>6</sup> There were

many Saviors in Jesus' day. But none were as exalted, respected, and revered as Caesar Augustus. There was no higher Savior.

Yet notice what's said in Luke's account. People said that the birthday of Augustus was "the beginning of the good news...for the world." But the angel says it is the birth of Jesus that is *good news of great joy that will be for all the people*. The culture said Augustus was Savior. But notice whom the angel calls Savior. Not a politician. Not a philosopher. Not a king. Not a pagan god. Not even Augustus. In this narrative, the only one proclaimed as Savior is the infant Jesus: *11For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.* (Lk. 2:11 ESV). There may have been many Saviors in Jesus' day. Augustus may have been proclaimed as Savior of the world. But Luke presents infant Jesus as the one true Savior. Luke tells of Jesus' birth in the context of Augustus' reign, and the angel uses the word "Savior," all to make one critical point: *Jesus is Savior above all*. There may be many so-called Saviors. But there is no Savior like Jesus. The one whose birth we celebrate on Christmas is a Savior above all.

Immediately we may cringe, or at least those in our society may cringe. Aren't the holidays supposed to be about love and tolerance and finding common ground? Why this line about "Savior" and the implication that Jesus is Savior and others are not? We're not going to find this line written on a *Hallmark* card or sung in an public elementary school Christmas program . It's too intolerant. Jesus is Savior *above all*? How can you be so closed-minded, especially at Christmas?

A report by the Pew Forum analyzed the religious practices of more than 35,000 U.S. adults.<sup>7</sup> It found that more than half of the Christians in this country believe that many religions can lead to eternal life. That is, one of every two who go to congregations like Bellevue Baptist or Hope Presbyterian or Highland believes Jesus is not Savior "above all." Rather, half of us believe that Jesus is Savior "with" all. Along with all the other gods or religious leaders who can save, Jesus can also save. One sociologist said: "*I think it really underscores the sense that the issue with religion in America is not that Americans don't believe in anything, it's that they believe in everything.*" We're willing to embrace almost anything as Savior. We might amend that to say, "*Americans believe in everything—except the possibility that there can be one Savior above all.*" But Christmas calls us to believe this once again. Jesus is Savior above all. There simply is no other religion, no other spiritual leader, no other way of life, and no other politician, philosopher, or poet who can save in the way Jesus saves.

And that is good news, because it means we finally have an object of hope that's not going to disappoint. You can bet that the Roman Emperors disappointed those who looked to them as Saviors. You can bet that any President, any governor, any mayor, and any board member will eventually disappoint you if you look to them for saving. No social network, no civic group, and no circle of friends can bear the burden of our hope and need for salvation. But there is one who can: the infant Jesus. No sibling, no spouse, no child, no parent, no job, no school, no career, and no sport can hold the weight of our hopes and needs. But the good news of Christmas is that there is one who can, above all, save—Jesus Christ. He is Savior above all.

But there's more Luke wishes to communicate regarding Jesus as Savior. Notice what kind of people are at the beginning of the story and what kind of people are at the end of the story. At the story's beginning we find Emperor Augustus: *1In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.* (Lk. 2:1 ESV). The story begins with a person who is at the highest possible position in that culture. Emperors like Augustus were so exalted that they were actually worshipped. It was one of those practices which drew together the varied peoples across the vast Roman Empire. They were required to worship the Emperor. You simply couldn't find a human with greater fame, celebrity, renown, respect, and notoriety than Augustus. That's how the story begins.

But notice what kind of people show up near the end of the story: *8And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.* (Lk. 2:8 ESV). Near the middle and end of the story, we introduced to "shepherds." We're not given their names. They're just described as "shepherds." We're given the name of the Emperor. But not the names of the shepherds. They are nameless and faceless. Even more significant, as shepherds, they are near the bottom of that society's social ladder. You didn't get much lower than shepherds.<sup>8</sup> They were dirty, grimy, and low-esteemed laborers. It was generally held that shepherds couldn't testify in court—they could be a disreputable lot.

Thus, the story moves from a person with the highest credentials and esteem to people with the lowest credentials and esteem. Yet, we are told by the angel, this infant Jesus is Savior for them all: *10And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.* Who is this great news for? Who will rejoice that Jesus is Savior? All! This good news of great joy is for "all" the people. That means it's for Augustus, and the shepherds, and everyone in-between. Not only does Luke focus on Jesus as the Savior above all. *But Luke shows that Jesus is Savior for all.* There is no one excluded from the salvation of this tiny baby. There is no one designated out of bounds. This good news is for "all" the people. Jesus is Savior for all.

And as if to put an exclamation point on this fact, God has infant Jesus born to two unmarried and homeless people and placed in a manger. You've got to wonder what kind of bed Caesar Augustus laid down in that night somewhere in the Roman Empire. It must have been a large bed, a soft bed, a luxurious bed, a quiet bed, a warm bed, a safe bed—a bed fit for a king. But what kind of bed did the Savior lie down in? It was a manger – a feeding trough for animals. His parents had no home here, and they could find no bed. This seems to be part of God's way of saying there was no one too low for Jesus. You couldn't sink below Jesus, because he's already sunk as low as you can go. Jesus is Savior for all—no matter how low they are.

Think of the remarkable diversity on the globe today.<sup>9</sup> If we could shrink the Earth's population to a village of 100 people, there would be 57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 from the Western hemisphere (North and South), and 8 Africans. 51 would be female; 49 would be male. 70 would be non-white; 30 white. 70 would be non-Christian; 30 Christian. 50% of the entire

world's wealth would be in the hands of 6 people and all 6 would be citizens of the United States. 80 would live in substandard housing. 70 would be unable to read. 50 would suffer from malnutrition. 1 would be near death. 1 would have just been born. Only 1 would have a college education. Remarkable diversity! Yet there's not a single person in that 100 Jesus is not willing to save. The infant in the manger came to save the 6 who have 50% of all the wealth. And he came to save the rest. He came to save the 80 in substandard housing. He saves the 70 non Christians. He saves the 30 Christians. He saves the 30 whites. He saves the 70 non whites. He saves the 1 near death. He saves the 1 just born. Jesus is Savior for all.

A few weeks ago the staff took a big home-cooked lunch down to the students at HopeWorks, served it, and ate with the students. While there, I met Mickey. Mickey was born and raised in Binghamton. As a teen and young adult, Mickey sold drugs, abused drugs, shot several people and narrowly escaped life-sentences in prison. Several of his best friends from the streets are now serving 1-2 life sentences in federal prisons. Many of his close friends are dead—having been shot in drug deals gone bad or in altercations with police. On top of a life riddled with terrible choices, Mickey struggled with schizophrenia and depression. His twin brother died at birth. His mother died at ten. And Mickey ultimately wound up in a group home, troubled, lonely, and without hope. But as he talked to me, Mickey shared how he met Ron Wade and Antonio and Mr. V. at HopeWorks. He started studying the Bible and praying. He started believing that God believed in him. He quit the drugs. He left the streets. He found community. And he said, *"Someone told me the other day, 'The good Lord has blessed me because of his grace and mercy, and because I've tried to be good.' But I told her, 'You don't know what you're talking about. You were right until you said, '...because I've tried to be good.' You should have just stopped with 'The good Lord has blessed me because of his grace and mercy...' If there's anything I've learned, it's that. I ain't never been good. But God has blessed me, just because of his grace and mercy.'"* That's the good news for all people. So many of us ain't never been good. At times we feel about as low as you can go. But the good news of Christmas is that Jesus is Savior for all. Even for someone like Mickey. Even for someone like you. Even for me.

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<sup>1</sup> Max Lucado, *Six Hours One Friday* (W. Publishing, 2004), pp. 89&#150;90

<sup>2</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (I-IX), The Anchor Bible (Doubleday, 1970), 204.

<sup>3</sup> Fitzmyer, 204.

<sup>4</sup> Fitzmyer, 400.

<sup>5</sup> Fitzmyer, 399.

<sup>6</sup> Fitzmyer, 394.

<sup>7</sup> Adelle M. Banks, "Pew Report Shows Americans Are Religious in Unpredictable Ways," *Religion News Service*, posted on [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com) (6/23/08).

<sup>8</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Paternoster Press, 1978), 96.

<sup>9</sup> Internet, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 34.