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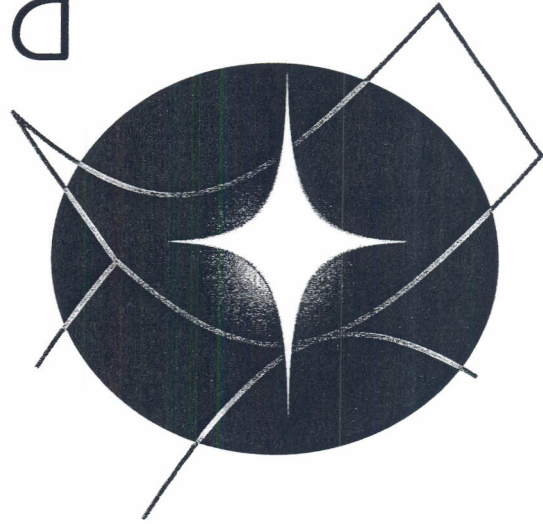
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It's Not What You'd Expect

BY BILLIE SILVEY



They weren't what you'd expect—a barren old woman well past her prime and a slip of a girl who had never known a man intimately. Both were from humble circumstances, yet both had been chosen for a role in the most remarkable drama of history. Each was swelling with a new life—lives that would change the world and give us all new hope.

The oddity of the situation is evident in Mary's song of reversals—lifting the low and filling the hungry—and in Zechariah's praise for the one who gives “light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.” Everything is turned upside down by this world-altering event. Impossible? Yet, as the angel Gabriel said, “With God, nothing is impossible.”

The witnesses to the miracle weren't what you'd expect. In addition to the humble girl and her promised husband, who knew the baby wasn't his, there was a gang of rough shepherds fresh from the fields who had come in response to heavenly heralds.

“And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds” (Luke 2:18).¹ Of course they did! Who could have conceived such outrageous events? It was as if the whole world had been turned on its head!

His human herald was extraordinary as well. John the Baptist lived in the wilderness and proclaimed that valleys would be lifted and mountains and hills brought low. He called people to repent, to share, to be honest, and to

be content with what they had. He even said to give half of what they had to those who didn't have enough.

He wasn't what you'd expect, either. The Savior of the world in the form of a helpless baby lying on a bed of hay. Going from being with his Father in glory to being poor, helpless, and lowly here on earth. Paul says of Jesus that, though rich, he became poor for our sakes (2 Cor 8:9). It was a choice he made, a gift of grace to us. J. I. Packer, in *Knowing God*, speaks of

what it meant for the Son of God to empty himself and become poor. It meant a laying aside of glory; a voluntary restraint of power; an acceptance of hardship; isolation, ill-treatment, malice, and misunderstanding; finally, a death that involved such agony—spiritual even more than physical—that His mind nearly broke under the prospect of it. . . . At the Father's will Jesus Christ became poor, and was born in a stable so that thirty years later He might hang on a cross. It is the most wonderful message that the world has ever heard, or will hear.²

The Old Testament and the Poor

Throughout Scripture, God always did the unexpected. When God revealed his will to his people through the Law, he emphasized justice. Grant Power points out that the word *justice* is used in the Old Testament in two different senses: (1) moral rectitude and (2) equity.³

In the first sense, biblical justice is impartial. Every individual is accountable for dealing fairly with his or her neighbors. Weights and measures are standard. Property rights and boundary markers are respected. Individuals are called to be honest, productive, contributing members of the community, to work for what they get. Laws are applied without favoritism—even leaders are subject to them.

The second sense of justice, however, goes far beyond the first. Justice in this sense involves protecting the weak and restoring the common good when things are out of balance. Being concerned with wholeness, this sense of justice is partial, not impartial. It *favors* the poor to create equality.

One of the most striking instances of God's interest in this form of justice is seen in the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25:8–17). Every fifty years, “on the Day of Atonement you shall make the trumpet to sound throughout all your land. And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants” (Lev 25:9–10).

This liberty includes freedom from unbridled greed. No matter what had happened to a family to cause them to fall below their neighbors economically, they wouldn't stay that way. Every fifty years, the land, which had originally been distributed equally, reverted to its original owners.

The wealth of the people was their land, so it was as if someone were to say, “You've had a hard year. You've paid a lot of money to doctors and mechanics. They've been able to invest that money while it was theirs, but this year, they have to give it all back.”

Ronald J. Sider, in *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, calls it “equality of opportunity.”²⁴ Not that we all have the same, but we all have the same opportunity, and we return to equity from time to time so we can start again on an even footing. This is truly revolutionary!

“What is the theological basis for this startling command?” Sider asks. Then he answers his own question: “Yahweh's ownership of everything is the presupposition.” Even though property is mine to be used at my discretion, I am only a steward. It ultimately belongs to God. He has every right to call it back and distribute it again as he deems fair.

“God's Word teaches a very hard, disturbing truth,” Sider continues. “*Those who neglect the poor and oppressed are really not God's people at all*—no matter how frequently they practice their religious rituals nor how orthodox are their creeds and confessions. God thundered again and again through the prophets that worship in the

context of mistreatment of the poor and disadvantaged is an outrage” (see Isa 1:10–17, Amos 5:21–24, Mic 6:6–8). God wants justice, not sacrifice.

“How then shall we live?” Sider asks. “First, God wants all people to have the productive resources to be able to earn a decent living and be dignified members of their community. . . . Second, God wants the rest of us to provide a generous share of the necessities of life to those who cannot work.” Thus the imperative is for both structural change and personal generosity, all in the name of justice.

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Jesus and the Poor

The Gospel of Luke was written to proclaim God's justice to outcasts and poor people. Time and again, it emphasizes Jesus' concern for the poor and the despised, expressed both in example and in teaching. As he began his ministry, Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth and read from Isa 61:1–2 in the synagogue:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,
Because He has anointed Me
To preach the gospel to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, . . .
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;
To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

This reading astonished the people, as it does today. They were appalled that he applied the prophecy to himself. We're amazed that he identified with the poor and weak and despised. From his birth in a stable to his burial in a borrowed tomb, he turned our values upside down, showing that worth is not measured by our standards of wealth and power and fame.

Harold Shank points to three more times in the book of Luke when Jesus spoke of his purpose in coming to earth:

1. In Luke 5:32 he said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance." Do we even *know* non-Christians, much less bring them to Christ?
2. In Luke 19:10 Jesus said, "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." Do we spend time working with lost and troubled people?
3. Finally, in Luke 22:27 Jesus said, "I am among you as the One who serves." Are we known for our lives of service?

It's a different sort of standard—upside down and out of kilter with the standard of this world. It's countercultural, but not culture denying. Jesus didn't go off to some desert somewhere. He didn't shut himself up with his followers and praise God and call it doing his will. He was out there with the poor and lost—seeking and calling and serving—and preaching the good news.

From Nazareth Jesus went to Capernaum, where he cast out an unclean spirit. By meeting human need, even on the Sabbath, he showed the precedence of even the humblest individual over formal religious observance. It's the message the prophets proclaimed: God wants mercy, not sacrifice.

But it was in his sermon on the plain that Jesus most clearly stated his astonishing message: the poor are blessed, the hungry filled, the sad made happy, and the reviled recognized. Not a group to make the Fortune 500. Not the stars of Oscar night. Not gold medal winners in the Olympics. But the poor, the hungry, the sad, and the reviled. No one who sought to change the world would have dreamed of that approach, but Jesus did. And he's changed lives for two thousand years!

We see his remarkable attitude in his answers to three questions put to him by various people in the book of Luke:

1. "*Are you the Coming One, or do we look for another?*" (Luke 7:19). When John the Baptist sends messengers to ask if Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus tells them to tell John "that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and *the poor have the gospel preached to them*" (Luke 7:22).

"The poor have the gospel preached to them." That's a surprising sign that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Son of God. It's not what you'd expect.

2. "*Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*" (Luke 10:25). When a lawyer asks him how to inherit eternal life, Jesus says we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. When the lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds with the parable of the good Samaritan,

who ministers to the broken and bloody man after the priest and the Levite have passed him by.

Then Jesus asks, "Which of the three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?"

"He who showed mercy on him," the lawyer answers. "*Go and do likewise*" (Luke 10:37).

3. "*Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*" (Luke 18:18). In this instance, a ruler asks Jesus how to get to heaven. Jesus tells him to keep God's commandments, and he says that he always has. Then Jesus says, "*Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me*" (Luke 18:20).

When the man refuses, Jesus sadly points out how difficult it is for rich people to go to heaven.

Did you catch the progression? John's apostles ask if he's the Messiah. Jesus tells them that, among other things, he brings good news to the poor. The lawyer asks how to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him to be a neighbor and show mercy to those who've been damaged by life. The ruler asks how to get to heaven. Jesus tells him to sell all he has and give to the poor. It's not at all what you'd expect.

Living Christlike Here and Now

As Christians, we're called to be like Jesus—to live Christlike lives in our own cities today, continuing his pattern of "turning the world upside down." It's a call, Packer says, to reproduce "in human lives . . . the temper of him who for our sakes became poor."

But, he concedes, we don't always hear or respond to that call. "So many of the soundest and most orthodox Christians go through this world in the spirit of the priest and the Levite in our Lord's parable, seeing human needs all around them, but (after a pious wish, and perhaps a prayer, that God might meet them) averting their eyes and passing by on the other side."

What a contrast to "the spirit of those who, like their Master, live their whole lives on the principle of making themselves poor—spending and being spent—to enrich their fellowmen, giving time, trouble, care and concern, to do good to others . . . in whatever way there seems need."⁵

Can we live such extraordinary lives in a city like Los Angeles? Let's look first at some of the characteristics of the city and see what implications we can draw from them:

1. *Los Angeles is large.* With over twelve million people, Los Angeles is large, complex, and overpowering. One of our elders estimates that a million people live

within five miles of the building where the Culver Palms Church of Christ meets. We cannot hope to affect such a large population on our own. We need God's indwelling Spirit to motivate and empower our work. Yet, the angel's words remain: "With God nothing is impossible."

We must pray the Lord of the harvest to send reapers into this vast urban field. We must become those reapers, praying for wisdom and guidance and working with him to seek and save the lost. God's attitude toward Los Angeles isn't all that different from his attitude toward Nineveh: "Should I not pity that great city?"

2. *Los Angeles is diverse and becoming more so.* Over a hundred different languages and dialects are spoken in Los Angeles. According to John Dawson, "With four and a half million Spanish speakers, Los Angeles is now the largest Spanish-speaking city. It is also the second largest Chinese city outside Asia and the second largest Japanese city outside Japan. It is the largest Korean city outside of Korea, the largest Vietnamese city outside of Vietnam, and the largest Philippine city outside the Philippines."

At Culver Palms, the congregations meet in English, Spanish, Korean—and the first of the year, we brought in a Chinese minister to work among that rapidly growing population.

No longer do we need to train missionaries to go just overseas. We need people trained in cross-cultural evangelism to work here. The mission field is all around us. Within a mile of our building, we have a Hare Krishna temple and a new Muslim mosque. We need to adjust and prepare for outreach to the world next door.

3. *Families are disintegrating in Los Angeles.* As Christians, we have a wonderful message of reconciliation for troubled relationships. However, the situation is often past that, and we're left to deal with the results. Poverty is disproportionately high among families headed by single mothers, and their children are more likely to be troubled.

The Culver Palms Life Skills Lab began last year to help meet the special needs of, particularly, minority women and single mothers. Many of these women have fallen behind due to abuse, poor education, lack of skills, and child-rearing responsibilities.

In December we graduated five students from our pilot class. Earlier this year I had breakfast with three of our graduates and caught up with what was happening in their lives. One had stopped by on her way home from work. She works nights in a bookstore so she can take her children to school in the mornings and be at home to pick them up in the afternoons. A woman who shares her apartment is with them at night. Another told of her internship, where she is learning office skills on-the-job. Her super-

visor is overjoyed with her ambitions and her eagerness to learn and promises to recommend her as soon as a permanent position becomes available. The third was interviewing for a part-time position as a community liaison that would allow her to enroll in classes in social work.

At first, when they weren't able to work, we gave of our resources to help these women. Now, having received training, confidence, and a support network, they're empowered to "earn a decent living and be dignified members of their community." And when we met to plan this year's classes, two of our graduates volunteered to help.

We need God's indwelling Spirit to motivate and empower our work. Yet, the angel's words remain: "With God nothing is impossible."

"You gave us so much," one explained, "we just want to pass it on."

4. *The population is polarizing into increasing extremes of wealth and poverty.* One of our professors at Fuller Theological Seminary gave us an eye-opening assignment. He sent us downtown to the Biltmore Hotel. We spent half an hour walking around the opulent lobby, absorbing the atmosphere and observing the people. Then we walked four blocks down the street to the Frontier, a transient hotel on the edge of Skid Row, and did the same. When we told the manager of the Frontier what we were doing, he laughed. "Four blocks and a world away," he said.

Los Angeles is filled with such shocking contrasts. You see it vertically in high-rise office buildings, where corporate executives arrive in helicopters at the top of the building while the cleaning crews arrive on foot and by bus at its base. They speak different languages and live totally different lives.

What does the Gospel of Luke say to such inequity? Could the principles of justice and of Jubilee be applied to such imbalance? Can we encourage mercy, love, and sharing against a prevailing gospel of greed?

Jesus loved the city so much that he cried for it (Luke 19:41). "Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he said on another occasion, "how often I wanted to gather your children to-

gether, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings” (Luke 13:34).

Do we love Los Angeles? Do we cry for its sins and work to draw its people to him?

Our God still does the unexpected. He still uses the unlikely and sends the extraordinary. And he still proclaims a revolutionary message, still turns things upside down!

As his people, we want to be found working with him—crying and praying for our city, meeting its needs, reaching out to the poor and the lost with a gospel of hope. The God who used two unlikely women to introduce his incredible plan can use you and me to change our city!

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Notes

¹All scripture quotations are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

²J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 55.

³Grant Power, “Shaping Economics after God’s Heart” (unpublished, 1990).

⁴Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984).

⁵Packer, 55–56.