JESUS – WHAT DOES THE BIBLE REALLY SAY?

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Jesus Christ was last seen on this earth over 2,000 years ago and yet he still remains a topic of great conversation and debate. Most people have an opinion of one sort or another when it comes to this question – **WHO IS JESUS?**

One of the purposes of this book is to help people to discover why this is life's most important question! Another purpose is to provide the answer; the answer that the Bible provides. Many people think that because the Bible was written over thousands of years and by many different contributors, it's just an accidental assortment with nothing tying them all together. As well, many people make the mistake of thinking that Jesus is only written about in the "New Testament" section of the Bible.

But, as you'll see, the whole of the Bible - every part of it (even the Law, the Prophets and the Writings of the Old Testament) - has many important and revealing things to say about Him – in fact, that is the main reason it was written in the first place! Why is this? It is because everything that God could wish for us will depend on us getting to know who Jesus is, and then getting to know him.

International Bible teacher and radio broadcaster, Brian Johnston, will take you through the Bible from cover to cover in asking the vitally important question: 'Who is Jesus?' In the final chapter, he concludes by issuing a compelling challenge to accept

why this is the fundamental question and not "Who WAS Jesus?"

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Recently, American forces have been in action in at least one foreign land. As with all wars, there have been casualties. Behind every single casualty, there are families who struggle to come to terms with their loss. I heard of a rich American whose son was killed many years ago. The news that his son had died a hero's death was perhaps little consolation to the grieving father. Then one day, a soldier arrived at the father's home to present him with a portrait he'd painted of the man who'd saved his life. It was the father's son. Understandably, that painting became the father's treasured possession even though he had a very fine art collection, including some by the great masters. This amateur painting of his dead son was given pride of place in the father's art collection.

When in due course the man died, an auction was arranged to sell off all his works of art. Many art dealers came to bid for the treasures that were among his collection. The first painting that was to be sold was that of the man's son by the amateur artist. But this painting aroused no interest in the assembled company of discerning art lovers. Instead, there were stirrings of impatience, grumblings as to when the auction would get underway with the sale of the really valuable paintings. The auctioneer tried to settle his restless audience by assuring them they must simply deal with this one painting first. "What am I to bid?" he asked. There was silence. "Will no-one make me a bid?" Still there was silence.

After a great deal of encouragement by the auctioneer for someone to bid, an old gentleman standing at the back bid ten dollars. "Ten dollars, is that all I'm bid? Are there no higher offers? Going, going ... gone! Sold for ten dollars to the old gentleman at the back of the hall."

A huge sigh of relief went up from all around the auction hall. Now, at last, they'd be able to get down to the real business of the day. Now for the art treasures! The voice of the auctioneer again brought them to attention. "Ladies and gentlemen, "he announced. "Today's auction is now at an end. I declare it closed." There was a gasp from all sides. "What! What do you mean? It can't be!" The auctioneer continued, "My instructions state: 'Whoever takes the son, takes all the paintings'. So all these treasures now belong to the old gentleman who purchased the portrait of the owner's son for ten dollars. Good day, ladies and gentlemen."

Perhaps, we're reminded of a Bible verse: *"He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life"* (1 John 5:12 NIV). Everything God could wish for us is bound up with knowing Jesus. He's the one whom to know is life eternal. As the Gospel by John chapter 17 and verse 3 says: *"Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent"* (NIV). Earlier John wrote in his Gospel, *"to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God"* (John 1:12 NIV). And if children, then heirs; the Bible says. By knowing Jesus Christ, the Son of God, by receiving him into our hearts by faith, we come into possession of all that God wants for us: like the forgiveness of

our sins and the possession of eternal life. He who has the Son has the life!

The whole of the Bible, every part of it, has many things to tell us about Jesus. Luke makes that clear in his Gospel when he describes Jesus – now raised from the dead – in conversation with two of his followers:

> *"And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going Jesus acted as if he were going further. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.*
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> *While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you troubled,*

> *and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see, a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have. "When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence. He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."*
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> *Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things"* (Luke 24:27-48 NIV).

The Bible in all its parts has things to show us about Jesus. At that time, only the first part had been written – which we now call the Old Testament. At that time it was divided into three parts, those referred to by Jesus as the Law, the Prophets and the Writings or Psalms. In each of these three main sections, Jesus said there were many things written about himself.

The New Testament is also divided up in a similar way. Each section of the New Testament has a lot to show us about the Lord Jesus, God's Son. He's the theme of the whole Bible. What Jesus said about the Old Testament to the Jewish people one day

remains just as true of the now completed Bible: *"the Scriptures ... it is these that testify about Me"* (John 5:39). The Bible's testimony to Jesus is the great theme which binds it all together: a wonderful, unique book that is both human and divine in nature, because its words, although penned by humans, were 'God-breathed' (2 Timothy 3:16).

If we want to understand the Bible, we need to get to know God's Son, Jesus. And to get to know him we need to come to the Bible. But we'll never enjoy and understand the Bible in any measure until we appreciate and believe its testimony about Jesus.

If we receive God's Son, we'll be able to receive the rest of what God has for us in his book. That's what I'd like you to remember from the illustration of the auction we were thinking about earlier. "He who receives the Son receives it all'. Knowing Jesus is our gateway to appreciating the whole Bible – and to experiencing its blessings. In this book, it's our intention to go through each of the main sections of the Bible, each time asking the question: 'Who is Jesus?'

CHAPTER TWO: JESUS PREDICTED IN THE LAW

Some time ago, I was intrigued to discover how the first written characters used by the ancient Chinese seem to tell a story of early human history which connects at many points with what we find recorded in the Bible's first book, Genesis. They do that because each Chinese character was, in effect, a word picture (pictograph). Now, if you were going to invent a vocabulary where symbols or pictures represent words, then you would certainly want to base it on pictures with well-known, obvious meanings – and that is what appears to have happened ...

Let me give you a few examples of the old Chinese characters, still recognizable in modern Chinese script although, as you'd expect, the writing has undergone some changes over time. The ancient Chinese word picture for 'trouble' is made up of their word picture for a tree inside their word picture for a garden. Anyone familiar with the opening chapters of the Old Testament of the Bible would probably think of the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden: the Bible story of Adam and Eve.

The Bible tells how God's enemy, the Devil or Satan, tempted Eve to eat the fruit of a tree in the middle of the garden – a tree of which, God had commanded, she must not eat. But she and Adam did. Human willful disobedience, set over against God's own will for his creation, became the very source of all our difficulty and trouble on this planet – as captured in the early Chi-

nese pictograph, it seems. It would be easy to dismiss the story told by the ancient Chinese characters as a coincidence if it were not for the fact that there are so very many of these remarkable similarities. Take the word picture for 'desire' or 'covet'. It's comprised of their symbol for 'woman' placed between two tree symbols – in what might easily be taken for a reference to Eve's temptation by her desiring and coveting the fruit of the tree in the garden of Eden. And so it goes on.

Missionaries to the Chinese have certainly appealed to it to show Chinese people a connection between Bible truth and the traditions of their own most ancient culture. But I simply wanted to introduce what I'd like to share with you in this chapter by referring to another one of these Chinese characters. It's their ancient word picture for 'good'. The symbol for it depicts 'the seed, or son, of a woman'. That's a curious connection of 'good' with 'the son, or seed, of a woman'...The Bible tells us that when humanity corrupted itself at the very beginning, God gave a promise of a time when another human (someone described as the 'seed of the woman') would make deliverance possible: deliverance from the results of human disobedience which had begun to trouble life in this world. The actual words are these:

> *"Then the LORD God said to the woman*, [he was addressing Eve after she'd eaten the forbidden fruit] *"What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, "Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the*

> *woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel"* (Genesis 3:13-15 NIV).

And so, at the very beginning, God promised that a human descendent of Eve would crush our enemy, the Devil. The promised human descendent was described as the offspring, or seed, of the woman. Here we find, in these words, the Bible's first prophecy of the deliverer, or messiah, who was coming. The answer to what we now experience as the human condition, with all its difficulty and trouble, had been worked out by God in advance. So far in advance, in fact, that when the first section of the Bible came to be written, it gave indications that this person was coming: someone who would be God's solution to the problem which our human willfulness had caused at the very beginning. When I used the word 'indications', I meant such things as the requirement for prophets, priests, sacrifices. Occasionally, a direct prophecy was given, but usually the indications were indirect.

The solution was obviously going to be costly. That much was clear from the mention of the hostility between descendants of Eve who would try to give allegiance to God on the one hand, and on the other hand, those who would end up fulfilling the evil desires of the Devil. At the other end of the Bible, the book of the Revelation looks back to the same costly conflict between the offspring of the woman and the Devil. It looks back from the perspective of God's plan having already been put into effect by the time the book of the Revelation was written. The apostle John to whom the vision had been revealed saw:

"*... a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.* [This represents Israel with her twelve tribes]. *She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth*. [This anticipated the fact that the deliverer God was sending would come from Israel, and be born a Jew]. *Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads.* [This dragon is later called the 'ancient serpent called the Devil, or Satan' (v.9)]. *His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne"* (Revelation 12:1-5 NIV).

These last sentences are hardly the depiction of the nativity we get on Christmas cards, but that's their setting. On earth, in the outworking of that heavenly vision, news of Jesus' birth would trigger Herod the Great's slaughter of the innocents. The Devil himself was behind Herod's actions. But now let's turn to more familiar words written about Jesus' birth:

"But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His

> *name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins"* (Matthew 1:20-21 NASB).

'She will bear a Son'. Jesus was the 'seed of the woman', long promised by God from the time of Eden's garden. Jesus Christ was the one the Bible's prophecies and its other indirect indications had been pointing towards. He would save his people from their sins. The deliverer had come at last. And what a deliverer! For Matthew's Gospel makes it clear that he was no ordinary human offspring of Mary. The angel had explained to a perplexed – and distressed – Joseph that the cause of his betrothed wife's pregnancy was quite supernatural*: "that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit."*

Author Philip Yancey writes: 'Could it be true, this Bethlehem story of a Creator descending to be born on one small planet? If so, it is a story line no other.' A story like no other is indeed the story that unfolds in the Bible. It is, quite simply, the greatest story ever told. Bible translator J.B. Phillips has written his imagined account of the reaction of angels to the amazing fact of God sending his Son to be born as a human baby. He imagined a senior angel showing a very young angel around the splendors of the universe. They view whirling galaxies and blazing suns, and then flit across the infinite distances of space until at last they enter our galaxy, our solar system ...

"Do you mean that our great and glorious Prince [the junior angel asks] ... went down in person to this fifth-rate little ball? Why should he do a thing like that? ... Do you mean to tell me ... that he stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?" To that, the senior angel replied,

"I do, and I don't think he would like you to call them 'creeping, crawling creatures' in that tone of voice. For, strange as it seems to us, he loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like him." The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond his comprehension.'

'Almost beyond his comprehension'? I should say it was! It's beyond our comprehension, too, but not beyond belief in the Bible, since it declares that, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17).

CHAPTER THREE: JESUS PREDICTED IN THE PROPHETS

G.K. Chesterton once said: 'Suppose we hear an unknown man, spoken of by many men. Suppose we were puzzled to hear that some men said he was too tall and some too short; some objected to his fatness, some lamented his leanness; some thought him too dark, and some too fair. One explanation ... would be that he might be an odd shape. But there is another explanation. He might be the right shape ...'

At first reading, we may not fully understand that. But in a way that suits my purpose for I simply want to observe that there are so many confused opinions about Jesus Christ, very often contradictory. Some people feel themselves to be totally without understanding when it comes to knowing the real Jesus. Recently, someone wrote to me. She had been reading about Jesus for the first time, it seemed, and she ended up saying: I feel so confused. Please help.' Well, I hope this book will help people like that. For, if we're going to set about answering the question: 'Who is Jesus?', then we do need to go to the Bible. Jesus is the central theme of the Bible. We've already learnt that, in the Old Testament, we find **Jesus predicted**. Then the New Testament opens with four biographies of Jesus Christ. So, in other words, we have **Jesus revealed**. The next Bible book we come to after the four Gospels is a history book, known as the 'Acts of the Apostles'. It tells us all about earliest Christian history. In it, we can read about how Jesus' disciples told others about him as they

spread the good news of Christianity. So it's there we find **Jesus preached**.

After that in the Bible we find various letters written by Christian prophets and apostles either to churches or individuals. The recipients of these letters were already Christians, so in them we don't find Jesus being so much preached as **explained.** These letters are very helpful: for even so soon after Jesus' life, wrong ideas about him had already begun to circulate and these wrong ideas get corrected in the letters. These same letters also show us what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Finally, the last book of the Bible is the Revelation. Among all that's presented in those awesome visions of the apostle John – in which God allowed him a glimpse into the future – is quite outstandingly John's message that Jesus is going to return to this earth again. John's message, then, is **Jesus expected.** You see what I mean about the Bible being all about Jesus? In a very real sense, he's the central – and unifying – theme of the whole Bible. It's the book Christians take to be God's own communication to us, and so just as relevant today as it ever was. So far, we've made a start with the Old Testament. It's divided into three: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. All three predict Jesus, and now, we'll look at the Old Testament Prophets. Perhaps the best thing we can do is to try to see it from the perspective of an outsider looking in. I'm thinking of someone who fits that category whose story is told in the Bible itself:

> *"... there was an Ethiopian ... and he had come to Jerusalem to worship. And he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the [Old Testament,*

> *Bible] prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." And when Philip had run up, he heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "He was led as a sheep to slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He does not open His mouth. In humiliation His judgment was taken away; who shall relate His generation? For His life is removed from the earth." And the [man] answered Philip and said, "Please tell me of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?" And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him"* (Acts 8:27-35 NASB).

Maybe we can identify in some ways with this traveler. Although he was from another culture, with possibly a very different religious background, he did, however, want to know more about the God of the Old Testament, the God of the Bible. He'd even travelled all the way to Jerusalem to worship God there as best he knew how.

He might have been worshipping out of considerable ignorance, but he was genuinely seeking to find the truth. God helped him in a wonderful way, and he'll help you, too, if you're also a true searcher after truth. Our Ethiopian friend in the story was on a spiritual journey as well as travelling through the desert. But he'd not found the answers he was looking for in Jerusalem. He came away, still unclear about many things. Yet he was looking in the

right place. By that I mean that he was reading his Bible – reading from the prophets – as he travelled homewards again.

Parts of the Bible are definitely not easy to understand, and he was struggling with the Prophets – especially the part in the writings of the prophet, Isaiah, where the prophet wrote about someone about to be slaughtered, just like the way people slaughter sheep. Why should he have been reading that section? I don't know, but perhaps they'd been reading it at Jerusalem while he'd been there. Maybe he'd asked Jews at Jerusalem about what this meant – this bit about a man being led to the slaughter. No wonder he was confused! Most Jews in Jerusalem wouldn't have been able to answer his question: whether the Bible prophet was speaking about himself or, if not, who else? I suggest that the Jews at Jerusalem didn't know the answer either, because if they had known it, they'd never have crucified Jesus Christ. In fact, as the Ethiopian was about to find out, Jesus Christ was the very person whose violent death or 'slaughter' Isaiah had been predicting hundreds of years earlier!

This Ethiopian was soon to receive more enlightenment than many Jews at that time – or even since. How could that be possible? How could the Jews themselves have missed the meaning of God's message which had been directed to them in the first instance? Yet, how often we, too, hear only what we want to hear, and see only what we want to see. Jews had been conditioned to understand that the Bible predicted the coming of a great deliverer or 'messiah'; not so much a spiritual deliverer, but a heroic political and military figure. They missed completely Isaiah's distinctive picture of the messiah. It's a bit like that G.K. Chesterton comment – when he spoke of different descriptions being

given of the same man. The Old Testament does give two very different descriptions of the predicted messiah, or deliverer. He's presented as someone who reigns gloriously, upon the defeat of all his enemies; but there's this other side as well, glimpsed in the 'suffering servant' picture of Isaiah's pen portrait of a man destined for slaughter. Suffering or glory: which sounds more attractive? Which would we prefer? It would be so easy to be selective and opt for the glorious all-conquering hero picture; while pushing away from us the darker, harder to understand, and much less attractive one. Many have done that.

But what if they're both pictures of one and the same person – like snapshots taken at different times in different situations? Again Chesterton's words come back to us: about a hypothetical man whom some reported as being too fat, others as too lean. Was Chesterton's man an odd shape – or just the right shape? What we need to understand is that both of the Old Testament's descriptions of Jesus are just right, of course. One of Jesus' disciples later brought the two pictures together when he said it "*predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow*" (1 Peter 1:11). The same disciple then went on to explain why the messiah whom God sent to Israel had to suffer and be led to slaughter. Peter said about Jesus (1 Peter 2:22-25 NIV):

> *"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats ... He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray."*

I have no doubt that this matches very closely what Philip must have said to the Ethiopian, because Peter too was using the same Bible text in Isaiah chapter 53 as his starting point. Peter tells us that we've all wandered away from God; irrespective of who and where we are, we've gone astray like sheep. Choosing to go our own way, and not God's way, has made us to be like wandering sheep as far as God in heaven is concerned. That's Peter explaining what he means by 'our sins'. That's why Israel's long-awaited messiah, Jesus, God's very own Son, had to be sacrificed. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice, for his was a perfect life: *"he committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth"*. It was all in God's plan that our terrible disease of sin might be healed by his wounds. What a wonderfully loving God! He's offering each of us a free pardon which was paid for by his own Son. So what do we need to do? Let's refer again to Peter: *"everyone who believes in [Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins"* (Acts 10:43).

CHAPTER FOUR: JESUS PREDICTED IN THE WRITINGS

I hope God is helping us to see his Son, and to hear his voice in the Bible. But now I want to describe something that's deaf as well as having no eyes. Yet it can still detect light and respond to vibrations. Can you guess what our mystery subject is? What if I told you Charles Darwin wrote a book about them? What if I mentioned that they were terrific gardeners? That over the centuries they've passed countless tons of earth through their bodies? We're talking about worms - I do hope you won't turn away in disgust! We can learn a lot of useful things about them – and from them. The humble earthworm is much more than bait for fish hooks, and there's something in particular here that I hope will help us as we look together into the Bible, trying to answer our question: 'Who is Jesus?'

You can't get much more down to earth than worms – although did you know that the world's longest earthworms are found in Australia where they can grow up to 3 meters in length? But even the very short earthworms with which we are probably far more familiar are tremendous gardeners. 90% of the leaves that fall from orchard trees are taken underground by earthworms where they enrich the soil. An average acre can be home to as many as 3 million earthworms, which can move about 18 tonnes of soil every year. Where they live, virtually all the topsoil to a depth of many inches will almost certainly have passed through the gut of an earthworm at some time. Worms swallow earth and di-

gest its nutrients before casting up the remains on the surface of the ground or in their burrows. In this way they work at an effective constant system of ploughing the ground which enriches and oxygenates the soil. They are tremendous gardeners – always loosening, stirring up and letting in air to make the soil more fertile. The evidence shows God's attention to detail: designing and planning the earthworm to be the willing, if humble, servant of the plant world.

There's quite an arresting verse in the Bible in the section previously known as the (Old Testament) Writings. It compares us to worms and begins by saying: *"The stars are not pure in [God's] eyes: how much less man, who is but a maggot - a son of man, who is only a worm!"* (The Book of Job 25:5-6 NIV). We see the stars as points of brilliant light, twinkling like pure diamonds in the night sky. But they're not pure. The God who exists, who is their Creator – only he is pure. We're not even compared to the stars. In the matter of purity, we're compared to worms, creatures of the dirt! The Bible's message is very pointed and plain. Sin soils all our lives. It leaves us contaminated, impure in God's sight and, as we are, unfit for heaven.

Imagine someone with a house in which they have a beautiful carpet, and white leather chairs. Would they welcome an invasion of worms? No way! And so we get the picture here in the Bible: we're impure in God's sight, quite unfit for heaven in our present condition. That would be the end of the story, but for the fact that there's an even more amazing verse in the Bible about worms. Once again it's found in the section of the Old Testament we're now considering: known as the Writing or simply the Psalms. It's a verse that relates to Jesus Christ. We're discovering

Jesus is referred to many times in all sections of the Bible – and this verse will help us to answer the question as to who Jesus truly is. It's found in Psalm 22 verse 6, where we read the words*: "I am a worm and no man ... despised by the people."* Those are effectively Jesus' words from the cross, for he gave expression to the opening words of this psalm, *"My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?"* when dying 2,000 years ago.

First of all, try to imagine what it would be like for us to become a worm. We can't even begin to imagine what it was like for the Son of God to come down so low as to become a man, and then lower still when dying shamefully on the cross. Remember, those words, 'I am a worm,' belong to him. Earlier, we reminded ourselves that ordinary worms are God's willing, humble servants whose work is so essential for our welfare. When we now turn to think about Jesus, and how he compared himself to a worm, we're encouraged to think of how he came and entered the common soil of our humanity in order to enrich our life; to remake and cultivate our relationship with God. His work on the cross was essential for our spiritual welfare. Above all else, these words – 'I am a worm' – graphically depict the Lord Jesus as an object of contempt as he hung there on the cross nearly 2,000 years ago outside Jerusalem. In our ignorance we sometimes treat worms with contempt, even disgust. In a similar way people mocked Jesus, spat on his face, plucked the hairs from his cheeks. He was despised and rejected.

In Psalm 22 (v.6) it's actually the 'scarlet worm' *(coccus ilicis)* that's referred to. When the female of the scarlet worm species is ready to give birth to her young, she attaches her body to the trunk of a tree, fixing herself so firmly and permanently that she

never leaves again. The eggs are laid and protected under her body until they are hatched. When the mother dies, her crimson body fluid stains the surrounding wood of the tree. What a picture all of this gives us of Jesus. He was fixed to the tree where he hung and died. He stained it with his precious lifeblood. As the hymn says: 'He wrote His love in crimson red, And wore the thorns upon His head.'

Allow me to bring before you the scenes of the cross where Jesus died. On the middle cross that day two thousand years ago in the Middle East, hung a twisted, tortured figure with nails through his hands and feet. His brow was bloodied, his back lacerated – the result of the scourging he'd received. His limbs were all wrenched, from the jolting when they'd set the cross into position. His mouth was dry and intolerably thirsty as he gasped for each breath. And the whole scene was plunged in God-forsaken blackness. There Jesus died, bearing the guilt of human sin – staining the cross to which he was fixed with his precious lifeblood. All this was in God's design that Jesus' death might be the source of life to us. God planned it this way that we should find our (new) birth in his death. We can have new life through believing in Jesus, because he now lives to offer us forgiveness. That's what his death was about – God is offering each of us a new, fresh, start. Jesus invites us to come to him (Matthew 11:28); to turn from our sin and come believing. "Come", the Bible says*: "Christ died for our sins' and "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved."*

Those verses just mentioned are in the New Testament, the second part of the Bible. Everywhere we read in the Bible about Jesus the same picture emerges. The basic connection between the

Old and New Testaments is one of 'promise' in the Old Testament and 'fulfillment' in the New – and that connection never comes out more clearly than in the person of Jesus. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God who entered our human experience so purposefully answers to all the pictures in the Old Testament.

Let me remind you again of what this book is all about. So far, we've visited all three sections of the Old Testament as they're found in the Hebrew Bible – those Jesus spoke of as the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms (or Writings – Luke 24). They all help fill out our picture of who Jesus is. In English editions of the Old Testament the layout is a little different with the historical, poetic and prophetic books placed together, but we've been following the layout of the Hebrew Bible as referred to by Jesus himself.

In the next section we move into the New Testament, and so we move from Jesus predicted to Jesus revealed, as we first of all meet him in the four Gospels. From the Gospels, we'll come to the history book of the New Testament (Acts) where we'll find Jesus preached. After that we come to the Apostolic Writings where we find Jesus explained or expounded. 'Explained' is perhaps not the best word to use because, of course, our human minds can never fully grasp the wonder of Jesus, the man who is God. Then we'll take a separate look at the book of the Revelation, at the very close of our Bible, just so we can fix our eyes more on the glory that's now his, and which will be his for ever and ever. So, the New Testament can be divided into three main parts just like the Old Testament. And every part of the whole Bible helps us to answer the question 'Who is Jesus?'

CHAPTER FIVE: MATTHEW'S GOSPEL: TEACHER

Someone has said you can gauge the size of the ship which has passed out of sight by the size of the wake, or wash, that it leaves behind. By this test of an individual's greatness, Jesus stands first in all of history. No human life has had an impact equal to his. His life 2,000 years ago was so powerful that it reset our clocks – by which I mean that afterwards we changed the way we reckon time by adopting his birth as the reference point.

We've already dipped into the first part of the Bible to find Jesus predicted. In fact, more than 330 Old Testament predictions were fulfilled by the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's one sure way of concluding that the New Testament is the intended sequel to the Old Testament, and that God's entire written communication to us is in those two parts that make up our Bible. As the Old Testament prepared the way for Jesus to be revealed in the New, perhaps there are a couple of main ideas we need to bring with us out of that first part of the Bible. The first is that of **a sacrifice.** Many today are quite unfamiliar with the origin of this idea, so it's worth just explaining it very briefly.

It's only as we let the first part of the Bible condition us to this idea that was big in the world of the Bible, that we can in some sense be prepared for what happened to Jesus in the New Testament. Otherwise, it really doesn't make a lot of sense. Long

ago, when a person was guilty of some wrong, God demanded that he should bring an animal to be slaughtered at God's chosen place of sacrifice. The animal was killed instead of the wrongdoer. The life of the sacrifice was accepted by God in substitution for the offerer's own life – which was forfeit through the wrong he'd done. It was a life for a life, to satisfy God's perfect justice. We need to pick up that idea and carry it forward now into the New Testament.

Then there's something else, very closely related to it. It's the idea of **'bearing sin'** or guilt. A guilty individual bore his own blame until such time as an animal – with which he'd identified as part of the ritual of sacrifice – bore the consequence of his sin instead of him or in his place. So with these points in mind, we enter now into the New Testament. We find it begins with four biographies of the life of Jesus. It's in these four Gospels, as they are called, that we find Jesus revealed. What God wants us to know about that unique life which once graced our planet is revealed to us in the Gospels – from four different vantage points.

Matthew's Gospel, or biography, of Jesus' life comes first. In many ways, Matthew was a Jew writing for Jews. He doesn't take time to explain Jewish customs, he simply mentions them. He also makes a lot of use of the Old Testament. It's as though his Gospel is like a bridge that spans between the Old and New Testaments. You can see that for yourself if you take time to count up all the times Matthew points out that when Jesus said or did something, he was actually fulfilling, or satisfying, an Old Testament prediction. Matthew really wanted to show us that the Old Testament predictions truly reveal Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah and Savior. Very soon in his Gospel, Matthew men-

tions the child Jesus being taken for safety into Egypt for a while. That's around the time when Herod the Great was trying to kill Jesus. But nothing else is recorded of Jesus' childhood, and soon we meet Jesus as a man at the Jordan River coming to be baptized by John the Baptist. After his baptism, Jesus endured forty days of being tempted in the desert. Later he gathered his twelve disciples who would become his companions for his three years in public view. At each of those points we may be reminded of an early section of Old Testament history.

Think of the Exodus from Egypt at another time of innocent slaughter, then came the nation of Israel's passage through – or baptism in – the Red Sea. That was followed in turn by Israel's twelve tribes being tested for 40 years in the desert en route to their promised land. So someone has described Matthew as 'a second Moses'; also for this reason – that Matthew records for us five major addresses or sermons by Jesus. It's the fact there are five of these sermons which draws this comparison with Moses because, of course, the first five books of the Bible are attributed to Moses. We sometimes call the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy the 'Pentateuch' (meaning five). The Old Testament begins with these five books; but the New Testament opens with Jesus' five addresses as collated by Matthew. This 'Christian Pentateuch', according to Matthew, includes the sermon on the Mount (in chapters 5 to 7); also Jesus' instructions to the twelve disciples before sending them out on a mission (in chapter 10); then, thirdly, the parables Jesus told on the subject of 'the kingdom' (in chapter 13); next come the woes Jesus pronounced on the hypocritical religious leaders among

the Jews (in chapter 23); and finally, Matthew includes Jesus' outline of future events (as found in chapters 24 and 25).

These are indeed five great speeches or sermons by Jesus - around which Matthew arranges his biographical material. The most famous or perhaps most popular of all these may well be the first speech: the so-called 'Sermon on the Mount' which Jesus gave. Most people will have heard some part of it, like*: "Blessed are the poor in the spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth"* (Matthew 5:3-5 NASB).

In the *Penguin Book of Historic Speeches*, the first speech listed is Chapter 5 of Deuteronomy. This is Moses' repetition of the ten chief laws of God: you shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, and so on. But soon after in *The Penguin Book of Historic Speeches* comes Matthew chapters 5 to 7, which is the first recorded address by Jesus to the Israel of his time. The editor of the Penguin book, Brian McCarthy, was a co-editor of *The* [London] *Times* and says in his introduction: 'the speeches of Moses and Jesus of Nazareth to their followers are still inspiring men and women to lead lives based on a moral code and still today, changing the course of history.'

Of course, I know people, as I'm sure you must also, who'll say they believe Jesus Christ was a good man; a man whose teaching is really much to be admired. They acknowledge that he was a great moral teacher; that the teaching of Christianity has shaped world history. It has a lot to offer people as a point of view, they say. But we need to be very clear that Jesus was much more than a great teacher. The last three times Matthew revealed Je-

sus as being the one answering to the predictions of the Old Testament, was when they had to do with the fact that Jesus was going to die on a Roman cross. At the beginning of the last week of his life, he entered Jerusalem 'sitting on a donkey' (21:5; see Zechariah 9:9). During the course of that week he was betrayed for 'thirty pieces of silver' (27:9; see Zechariah 11:12). Finally, as he hung on the cross to die, his executioners 'divided [his] garments' between them (27:35; see Psalm 22:18). Those expressions about the donkey, the silver and the garments, or clothes, were all drawn by Matthew from the Old Testament. They were predictions (among many others) showing how God had planned Jesus' death.

Jesus was executed nearly 2,000 years ago under Roman authority by the method known as crucifixion. The victim was nailed to a stake that was driven into the ground. Jesus' magnificent moral teaching could never have become effective for us if he hadn't died according to God's plan. By his death, and resurrection on the third day following it, according to the Bible (1 Corinthians 15:3), Jesus Christ now offers all his followers the power to live out his teaching (see Romans 8:4). The original, and unchanging, message of Christianity is that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:43). A fresh start with God! That's why Jesus' death was not the tragic accident of a good life cut short, but something God had carefully planned from before the creation of the world. He'd been leading up to it throughout history by introducing those Old Testament ideas of sacrifice and sin-bearing.

In Jesus, the Bible reveals, God was finally substituting his own Son in our place. God himself, through Christ, was serving our

sentence and paying the price of our rebellion. Jesus Christ gave himself as a perfect sacrifice for us (Galatians 1:4). Through his death we can live. Everyone who turns from their sin and turns to God believing in Jesus receives a divine pardon and will not be punished in the judgment of the last day (John 5:24).

God offers us one way of escape from the punishment our sins deserve. Jesus, the great teacher, taught that he himself was that way when he said: *"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life"* (John 14:6).

CHAPTER SIX: MARK'S GOSPEL: GOD'S SUFFERING SERVANT

Many who call themselves Christians today are experiencing suffering in many countries of the world. Perhaps, the second book of the New Testament, the second biography of Jesus, has a special message for people like that. Some people think that Mark wrote his Gospel, in the first instance, with suffering Christians in mind: probably Christians in Rome around the early or mid sixties of the first century. Certainly, many experts believe that the writer of this Gospel was John Mark (see Mark 14:51, 52). Elsewhere in the New Testament, we meet John Mark as an understudy to Paul and Barnabas (e.g. Acts 11:30). What's more the apostle Peter also refers to Mark in his first letter (5:13) as 'Mark my son' – showing that a very close bond existed between them. That raises the possibility that Mark was Peter's understudy, at least for a while. It's interesting Peter refers to Mark in this way, because I've personally been attracted to the possibility of Mark being Peter's assistant ever since having had it pointed out to me that the content and structure of the whole of Mark's Gospel is quite remarkably summarized in the record of Peter's preaching which we find in Acts chapter 10 (vv.36-42).

For Mark, the Gospel story begins – not with any nativity story – but with the mention of John the Baptist and Jesus' own baptism at John's hands. Then the scene shifts to Galilee, the scene of Jesus' own ministry (1:14ff). In fact, with Mark, we don't leave

Galilee until the tenth chapter – which is about two-thirds of the way through this shortest of the four Gospels. Thereafter, we travel with Jesus beyond the River Jordan and into Judea. Finally, the last third of Mark's narrative is devoted to the last week of Jesus' life. Now compare that with the outline of Peter's sermon in the house of Cornelius as recorded for us by Luke:

> *"You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached – how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen ... by witnesses whom God had already chosen ... He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead"* (Acts 10:37-43 NIV).

That's quite a parallel. We can perhaps imagine Mark listening to Peter using this same sermon structure – not just in Caesarea – but many times: all about that '*beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached*' and then switching later to *'everything [Jesus] did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem'*. After hearing it a few times, Mark would be well rehearsed for filling out the details as directed by the Holy Spirit – and in that way giving us his Gospel as we have it today in our Bible. So it's possible that Mark's was the first Gospel to be written, after the sto-

ry had been told orally for a generation. Although there are only 31 verses which are unique to Mark's version of events, it's still true that the Gospel by Mark is very different in emphasis from Matthew's and Luke's. In the previous chapter, we reminded ourselves that Matthew's Gospel is built around five great teaching sermons of Jesus. In contrast, Mark's version of events is long on action and short on speech.

The action as Mark narrates it is also fast-paced. No less than 42 times we come across the expression 'and immediately'. Bearing in mind what we've said about John Mark acting as an understudy for Paul and Barnabas, and the connection of Mark with Peter – and him likely assisting Peter – maybe we could even say this is a Gospel written by a servant about the Servant – and, of course, I'm referring to Jesus Christ as the Servant in the sense that he came from God to do God's will on this earth. Just as Matthew wrote about Jesus as a teacher; Mark writes about Jesus as a servant. In fact, Mark particularly focuses his attention (like Isaiah) on the suffering nature of Jesus when viewed as the servant.

In three successive chapters in Mark's Gospel, in chapters 8 (v.31), 9 (v.31) and 10 (v.32-34), Jesus makes a very definite point of explaining to his disciples that he's going to suffer and die. Let's just pick up the first of those from Mark chapter eight:

> *"Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." "But what about you?" He asked. "Who do*

> *you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ." Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this"* (Mark 8:27-32 NIV).

Notice how Mark records for us that: 'He spoke plainly about this'. This first plain statement of his impending suffering and death came as something of a bombshell to his followers – particularly as it followed hard on the heels of Jesus' clear confirmation that he was in fact their long-awaited Messiah. Jesus plainly tells them he's a Messiah who'll conquer by means of death and suffering.

Within about a hundred years either side of Jesus, there were something like a dozen others who attracted a following – people like Judas of Galilee (Acts 5:37) – who led uprisings before being dealt with by the authorities. In each of these cases, the death of the leader meant the end of the movement. Their followers either gave up or found themselves another leader from the same family. But the followers of Jesus did neither of these things. Why was that? It was because Jesus' death was not the end. When he rose on the third day, it was really the beginning of the spread of the Christian revolution which turned the world upside down. As Mark shows, it'd been God's plan all along to send a Messiah who'd suffer and die, then rise from the dead. Why?

Let me first tell you the true story of two brothers in San Francisco. The younger brother ran with a street gang. One night during a fight the knife in his hand met the soft flesh of a rival. Death was swift. The young man ran home to swap his blood-stained clothes for clean ones, then, he disappeared into the night. The older brother arrived home soon afterwards to find the clothes lying where they'd been abandoned. The sound of police sirens was in the air. By the time the police knocked on the door, he, the older brother, was wearing the stained clothing as if it was his own. He was charged, tried and eventually executed for murder. During all this the younger brother witnessed the love of his older brother – who died in his place and paid his penalty. Finally, it became more than he could bear. Overcome with remorse, he turned himself in and made a full confession. But the police sent him away. There could be no charges because his brother's death had satisfied the demands of the law.

And that's what God has done for us. He's paid for our sin in a way that's both just and loving, by taking our punishment upon himself. He came in person as Jesus to do exactly that at the cross – that's why Jesus' death was such a necessary part of his rescue mission as God's Messiah. Will you follow Jesus who loved you and gave himself for you? Only after speaking about his cross for that first time in Mark chapter 8, did Jesus begin to teach his followers that following him will mean they too have to take up a cross (8:34). Here's what he said:

> *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for*

> *a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"* (Mark 8:33-37 NIV).

Remember, this is all in Mark chapter 8. Jesus confirms plainly for the first time that he's the long-awaited Messiah; then, immediately gives the shocking news that his mission will involve his own suffering and death – for the reasons we've given. And next, Jesus explains to his followers that following him as his disciples will demand the death of their old self-centered lifestyle. And so that's why I think the message of Mark's Gospel relates to Christians who are suffering for their faith today. Mark's original target audience may well have been first century followers of Christ who were suffering for their faith under the Emperor Nero's persecutions at Rome. His Gospel was a Christ-centered reminder to them that this was God's way for them, as it had been for Jesus himself.

CHAPTER SEVEN: LUKE'S GOSPEL - SAVIOUR

We begin this chapter by recalling news of a sensational and controversial find. TIME news magazine (4 November 2002) said it could be 'the most important discovery in the history of New Testament archaeology'. The find in question was a 'bone box' (ossuary). There's nothing too remarkable about that. Such items were known to have been in use among the Jews from about 20 BC until AD70. For it was then during that ninety-year period, that a different type of Jewish burial custom was popular one which involved the use of these so-called 'bone-boxes'. Previously, Jews had simply buried their dead, but at that time they buried the bodies until they had decomposed, then, they collected the bones and placed them in a bone box.

Towards the end of the year 2002, one such bone box was found with an inscription which read: 'James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus'. Apparently, it's quite common to find these things with the name of the deceased person marked on them. It's less common, but not altogether rare, to have a mention of the name of the deceased's father. But never before had there been a bone box found which referred to the brother of the dead person. This Jesus must have been someone with a kind of celebrity status in those days in order for him to merit a mention in this quite unique way. He also must have lived between 20 BC and 70 AD. What we do know from the New Testament of the Bible is that Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, had other children including a

son called James. This James, although for a while hostile to faith, became one of the early leaders in the first Christian churches.

There may well have been other people called James, Joseph and Jesus who lived around that time and who were all related in the same way; but what weighs with the experts is the exceptional reference to this 'Jesus' as being the deceased person's brother. There's really only one candidate for a Jesus famous enough to merit a mention in a way which defied all convention. Even the Jewish editor of a biblical archaeology journal referred to the bone box as 'something ... visible reaching back to the single most important personage ever to walk the earth' (Hershel Shanks, Biblical Archaeology Review).

Another archaeologist, a professor at Harvard said that this bone box find, if established, would force people to take the New Testament seriously, even if they'd not previously been inclined to do so. Is the box genuine? The debate still rages. An antiquities trader, Oded Golan, was certainly charged later with forgery, but there is no consensus that the James Ossuary inscription is forged. Indeed, the best scholars in the field are on record as testifying to its authenticity.

The famous British archaeologist, Sir William Ramsay spent 25 years of his life trying to see if history could disprove the New Testament. Although initially reluctant to accept it, he came to the conclusion that Luke, the writer of the third Gospel, was a top-ranking historian. If we only just dip into the third Gospel, we can see Luke's writing was an attempt to set Christianity on the stage of world history. For example, Luke sets out his mission statement right at the beginning of his writing:

> *"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you ... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught"* (Luke 1:1-4 NIV).

In keeping with this brief, when Luke gives his version of the events surrounding the birth of Christ in chapter two, his writing is full of historical detail allowing the certainty of the things he was recording to be tested:

> *"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David"* (Luke 2:1-4 NIV).

TIME magazine, when writing up the controversial find of the bone box we described earlier, made the comment (and this is the important point): 'almost no educated person these days doubts that Jesus lived.' In no small degree, it's Luke we have to thank for putting Christianity on the stage of world history. Luke gives us the big picture of the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ which is available for **the world.** If Matthew wrote his Gospel for a Jewish audience in the first in-

stance, then it's just as clear that Luke wrote the third Gospel with the broader Gentile world more prominently in view. Luke drops us that hint early on as he tells what happened when Jesus was brought as an infant to the temple at Jerusalem:

> "*Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy* Spirit *was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: 'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles ...'"* (Luke 2:25-32 NIV).

In that way, Luke put down a marker early in his writing that God's salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, his Son, was for all people – Gentile as well as Jew. Not only is Jesus a savior for all nationalities; but Luke is just as clear in letting us know that the salvation God is offering through Jesus Christ is available for all types of people. Luke demonstrates that throughout his Gospel by selecting examples of how Jesus befriended the friendless; of how he went out of his way to include those who were excluded by society; how he actually touched those who were then considered to be the 'the untouchables' and expended his compassion on sick and suffering folks. Luke, it appears, is at pains to pre-

sent to us Jesus as someone who had come to reach out to everyone, someone who had come 'to seek and to save that which was lost' (Luke 19:10). This is especially brought home to us in the three stories of chapter fifteen featuring a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. What these things had in common was their 'lostness'; but they were all found! Have you ever realized you're lost? I mean discovered you've 'gone astray' (Isaiah 53:6) from God and his ways? We can't be found until we first acknowledge we're lost. Call out to God now and he'll find you. He's not far away from any one of us (Acts 17:27). There's a hymn that has this to say about Jesus:

He held the highest place above,

Adored by all the sons of flame,

Yet, such His self-denying love,

He laid aside His crown and came

To seek the lost,

And, at the cost,

Of heavenly rank and earthly fame,

He sought me. Blessed be His Name!

Yes, Luke in his Gospel presents Jesus as a Savior who came to seek and to save the lost. All kinds of people are lost. Tax-collectors and sinners; poor and oppressed people; women as well as children; both Samaritans and Gentiles – they all get a write-up in Luke's Gospel. In those days tax-collectors were seen as Jews

who were collaborating with the Roman authorities, and so were very unpopular; women were, you might say, regarded as second-class citizens; age was respected and so children very much had to keep their place; and Samaritans were looked down on as racially impure. But Luke makes a feature out of including examples of Jesus ministry to all those types of people! Through Luke's writing, God's making it clear to us that he's not influenced by what we might think of as cultural barriers and social classes. Luke shows us Jesus is interested in everyone. He's interested in **you!**

CHAPTER EIGHT: JOHN'S GOSPEL - GOD'S SON

Some people enjoy the type of puzzle which invites them to find which of a set of pictures or illustrations is the odd one out. If the range of choice was the four Gospels; then the one which stands out as different is the fourth Gospel, written by the apostle John. When reading a book, there's a member of our family who always turns straightaway to the back of the book to get an idea of how the story ends. For me, that would be a good way to spoil a story, but turning to the back of John's Gospel might be a good thing to do before reading the rest of it. Near the end, in chapter 20 verses 30 and 31, the author, John, gives us his reason for writing the fourth Gospel. He says: *"Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."*

So John himself tells us that his emphasis is on presenting Jesus as the Son of God. John, it seems, wrote his Gospel much later than the other Gospel writers. John's Gospel was among the last books of the Bible to be written – among the writings of the apostle John in his old age. Written at a time when wrong opinions about Jesus were beginning to circulate, its message would have been just as helpful to Christians as non-Christians, encouraging them to remain clear in their understanding of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. To that end, John has been

very selective in his record of the signs, or miracles, performed by Jesus Christ during his public ministry before his death on the cross. He describes only seven of them, and they're all specially chosen towards this goal: the goal of demonstrating that the man known as Jesus of Nazareth is in fact the Son of God.

These days there are those who specialize in using the media to create a certain image of a person. It's hardly surprising then if we now hear people wondering if Jesus wasn't just an ordinary son of Mary and Joseph after all – but someone whose 'spin doctors' or 'PR' got way out of control. How then does John go about convincing his readers that Jesus Christ really is unique, much more than a great teacher – that he really was God come as Man? He does it by carefully choosing from among all the miracles Jesus performed. He presents seven which would be particularly powerful to anyone familiar with the teaching of the first section of the Bible, the Old Testament. Each of the seven signs John records Jesus doing is characteristic of the work of God himself as presented in the Old Testament. Throughout the Gospels of John they are presented as 'signs' or credentials, demonstrating the claim that Jesus Christ was clearly understood to have made on many occasions – the claim that he was God's Son. Note the words of John chapter 5 verse 18: *"Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God."*

So, it's simply not possible to say Christ never made such claims, for he clearly did and frequently aroused the Jews' hostility for doing so - which goes to show that it's inconsistent to view him as merely being a good man, a great moral teacher or prophet.

For if he told lies, he surely wasn't even a very good man; but if he didn't tell lies, or make false claims, then we must go the whole way and receive him as being what he claimed to be – no-one less than the Son of God! Let's take the seven signs in the order in which John presents them. Remember these are the star witnesses in the case John is presenting: the case for Jesus as the Christ, the Jewish Messiah, the Son of God and Savior of the world. The first occurs at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee, as chapter 2 informs us. When the wine ran out Jesus said: "*Fill the waterpots with water ... and ... when the master of the feast had tested the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from ... [he] called the bridegroom ... and ... said ... "You have kept the good wine until now!*"

But turning water into wine is one of the abilities of the Creator as Psalm 104 declares in its poetic language: *'God] waters the hills from His upper chambers ... that He may bring forth food upon the earth and wine that makes glad the heart of man".* In other words – rain to grape or water to wine, just as Christ performed instantly at Cana. When we return to John chapters 4 and 5 we find Jesus healing the son of a nobleman who was sick at Capernaum and later, at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem itself, Jesus raised up a sick person with the instruction*: "Sin no more"*. Both these signs point us back to Psalm 103 where verse 3 boasts about God *"who forgives all your iniquities"* and *"who heals all your diseases"*. If these are God's prerogatives, and Christ exercised them, then we see John's point, don't we? The feeding of the five thousand comes next in John chapter 6 – the only one of Christ's mighty miracles recorded in all four gospel accounts. Such a vast crowd of people out in the desert without food, then

the disciple Andrew brings forward a young lad with his own packed lunch of five barley loaves and two small fish. He'd come better prepared than the rest, but he gave them to Jesus, and verse 11 of John 6 says: *"when He [Jesus] had given thanks He distributed them to the disciples, and the disciples gave to those sitting down ... as much as they wanted ... and they were filled"!*

What a miracle, but how slow the Jews were to believe! In the discussion between them and Jesus which followed, they compared what Jesus had done with the provision of the special manna bread during the desert journey their ancestors had made. It appears that they wrongly attributed this earlier work of feeding the people to Moses. But as Jesus told them, any reading of Exodus chapter 16 shows that it was God in heaven who sustained the people with food in the desert – just as Jesus himself had now done. The evidence mounts even as we stay in the same chapter – that's John 6 – for that's where it's recorded that the disciples *"saw Jesus walking on the sea"* of Galilee. This was while they were in a boat on the sea or lake which was rising due to a strong wind blowing, and he walked out to them and entered the boat. The vision of the Lord walking on and through that wind-driven surf may well have reminded the disciples of the language of Psalm 104 where God is spoken of as walking amid the elements of wind and water. Listen to verse 3*: "[God] lays the beams of His chambers in the waters, who makes the clouds His chariot, who walks on the wings of the wind"* (compare this verse with Psalm 89:9).

Further on in the same gospel by John, in chapter nine, Jesus and his disciples encounter a blind beggar by the side of the road. Jesus, verse 6 says, anointed the eyes of the man with clay and

sent him to wash in the pool of Siloam. When he came back he could see for the very first time in his life, for he'd been someone who'd been born blind. It all led to quite an animated debate, for there were skeptics in those days as well as today – people who looked for some rational explanation. 'It's a case of mistaken identity', they suggested, 'he just happens to look like the blind beggar who once sat here'. But the beggar's own testimony silenced them all when he said *"One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see"*.

The only rational explanation for the miracle was not to mistake the identity of the One who made the blind man see. Psalm 94 verse 9 says*: "He who formed the eye, shall He not see?*" That's referring to God, of course. The final sign of John brings to our attention is the raising of Lazarus after he'd been dead and in the tomb for four days. While some grumbled*: "Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying*"" Jesus' response in chapter 11 is to say:

> *"... take away the stone. Martha the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, 'Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?' Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, 'Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me.' Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth!' And he who had died came out bound hand*

> *and foot with grave-clothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Loose him, and let him go"'.*

Compare that with the clear word in Deuteronomy 32:39 where God declares: *"I, even I, am He, and there is no God besides Me; I kill and I make alive"*. Indisputably, only God can make alive, which is precisely what Jesus is recorded as doing. Supreme among all the miracles which declare Jesus Christ to be God's Son, is the fact that he raised Lazarus from the dead. He did among us what only God can do.

CHAPTER NINE: THE ACTS - JESUS PREACHED

A few years ago I stood on Mars Hill among the ruins of ancient Athens and looked over what remains of the layout of its ancient marketplace. I tried to imagine it bustling with life as it must have been in the time when Paul visited, and when his Christian sensitivities were offended by the myriad idols he saw in that ancient centre of culture and learning. But Paul's missionary reputation was not for nothing: his approach was tactful in the extreme. He didn't go ballistic in denouncing paganism there; but he commented on the fact that one of their altars bore the unusual inscription: 'To the unknown god'. From this point of contact, Paul launched out into the kind of logical argument the locals were used to; promising to tell them about the God who, as yet, was unknown to them.

In fact the writings of Plato and others confirm the Bible as totally authentic when it mentions this altar at Athens. Some time earlier, it seems the Greeks at Athens felt they were under a curse because among all the gods they worshipped there was one they suspected they'd overlooked. Their history records they received an oracle to summon the poet Epimenides from Crete (in fact Paul quotes his poetry later, so very likely he knew the background we're rediscovering). When Epimenides came at their request, he'd told the superstitious Greeks to let a flock of sheep graze on the hillside and whenever a sheep lay down they were to build an altar and offer sacrifice to the unknown god who'd

given this as his sign. They inscribed the altars as being to 'the unknown god' so as not to offend the deity by using an inappropriate name. It appears then that one of these altars had survived until the time of Paul's visit – still standing as a kind of monument to this episode in the city's history.

It was a golden opportunity for Paul as he met with these philosophers who were always curious to hear new things. For Paul had things to tell them which would indeed be new to them. Some of them we're told were Epicureans. Those of this school of thought held to a philosophy which couldn't see beyond a purely natural explanation for how all things came about. No doubt aware of this, Paul launched out by affirming his belief in the supernatural origin of the universe. He spoke to them of the "God who made the world ..." (Acts 17:24). It was a belief he enlarged on further in his letter to The Romans. There he said:

> *"What may be known about God is plain ... because God has made it plain ... For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse ... Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images ... They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator"* (Romans 1:19-25 NIV).

The worldly wise of Athens had no excuse for the foolishness of their thinking, and some as they listened to Paul took on board this teaching which was 'new' to them. Next, (in Acts 17:25) as

Paul preached to the Athenians, he described the creator God who was unknown to the Greeks, as the one who *"gives to all life, breath, and all things"*. Today we humans boast in our achievement in, say, medical science, space exploration, and the world of communications and information technology. But, as Paul went on to remind the Athenians, we are not, and never will be, masters of our own destiny. There are things far too wonderful for us. We can by no means solve all our problems. We operate best in the way we were designed to operate: when we acknowledge we are dependant for every breath we breathe on the God who made us.

Paul still wasn't finished. He went on to say (Acts 17:26) that God had: *"made from one blood every nation ..."* That's some claim. But the more we learn about DNA, the amazing information molecule in the cells of our bodies, the more insight we have into that revealed fact. Published studies have claimed to track changes in a type of DNA all the way back to a so-called 'African Eve'. But still staying with Paul's message at Athens, he next acknowledged a basic human instinct – which is that we seem to need something to worship (17:27). Paul talks about *"seeking the Lord"*. From ancient times we find evidence of people being buried together with religious artifacts, in the vain hope these would prepare them for an afterlife: people, in their own misty way, trying to feel their way to the God who's there – according to that innate belief within us that God exists. Today we idolize or hero-worship very different things, but the God-shaped hole inside each and every one of us can only be filled in one way. We were made to glorify our Maker. So let Paul tell us – just as he told the Athenians – what we have to do. The message here

is to all seekers in every age; seekers after the God who's there. *'Repent'*, Paul says, which means 'turn round' – allow your way of thinking to be turned round. Be assured that this God who's there is going to bring this whole world into judgment. One day he'll hold us accountable. The day is already appointed; as is the judge who'll try our case. Can you understand from Paul's words who the judge will be? Paul said (in Acts 17:31): *"[God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."*

So Paul preached that Jesus – Jesus Christ raised from the dead by God – will be the judge of all. The history book of Acts opens with the author telling us that in his previous volume he'd written about all Jesus had done and taught until his ascension (Acts 1:1, 2); the implication is that in this book of Acts, Dr. Luke's second volume, he was now writing about what Jesus was still doing and teaching – except now the doing and the teaching was being done through Jesus' disciples. The disciples preached a living Saviour – Jesus. And who is Jesus? The Jesus preached by Paul is the future judge. But the very fact that he's been raised, means that he once died, died for our sins according to the Bible.

This opens up the tremendous opportunity for us: that we can meet Jesus now as a compassionate savior rather than later as a condemning judge. Receive him by faith as your personal savior, believe on him as the judge who himself paid your penalty; trust him knowing that only those who do so are forgiven ... then follow him, for it's the best way to live! But what if we reject all notion of judgment to come – maybe even question how Jesus could 'judge the world with justice'? Perhaps, the words of a

playlet entitled 'The Long Silence' offer a challenging perspective:

'At the end of time, billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly – not with cringing shame, but with belligerence. 'Can God judge us? How can he know about suffering?' snapped a pert young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. 'We endured terror ... beatings ... torture ... death!' In another group a Negro boy lowered his collar. 'What about this?' he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. 'Lynched ... for no crime but being black!' In another crowd, a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes. 'Why should I suffer' she murmured, 'It wasn't my fault.'

Far out across the plain there were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering he permitted in his world. How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world? For God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said. Each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered the most: a Jew, a Negro, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed arthritic, a thalidomide child. In the centre of the plain they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever. Before God could be qualified to be their judge, he must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth – as a man!

'Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind when he tries to do it. Let him be betrayed by his closes friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be tortured. At the last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die. Let him die so that there can be no doubt that he died. Let there be a great host of witnesses to verify it.' As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled. And when the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No-one uttered another word. No-one moved. Suddenly all knew that God had already served his sentence.'

CHAPTER TEN: THE JESUS OF THE EPISTLES - JESUS EXPLAINED

We're going through the different sections of the Bible in order to answer the question 'Who is Jesus?', and now it's the turn of the letters of the New Testament. Here we find 'Jesus explained'. We're only going to sample one of the letters – but it's the one that's been described as the greatest teaching letter in the Bible: the letter to the Hebrews. This letter, written to the early Hebrew or Jewish Christians, has at least eleven references to Jesus as God's Son. When King Solomon was building the magnificent temple for God at Jerusalem, we read in the Bible that: *"he set up ... pillars by the vestibule of the temple*|" (1 Kings 7:21). What an impressive entrance-way into the temple they must have made: those two pillars - one on either side! We enter this letter to the Hebrews like that. Its opening two chapters are like those two great pillars. All that follows in the letter is supported by the two things about Jesus Christ presented in these two opening chapters. The first chapter shows us that Jesus is fully God; and the second chapter, presents the fact that he is also truly human. All the teaching of this letter – and all the teaching of the other Bible letters too – build from there.

In this brief review, it'll be more than enough just to look at that first chapter which tells us about Jesus as God, God's Son, and supplies important information about his person and his work. The first four verses will be enough for us because they're

packed with so many rich treasures. What were Lord Caernarvon's words as Tutankhamun's tomb was being opened? 'What do you see?', he asked. Back came Howard Carter's answer: 'I see wonderful things!' I promise you there are wonderful things in store in just these few verses alone. Here's what they say:

> *"God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son [lit. 'in Son'], whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they."*

There are, indeed, some wonderful things there. We'll pick up on seven of them and work our way through them with a brief comment to expand on each in turn. Perhaps, we could think of them as seven points of splendor, because they are certainly full of the splendor and glory of Jesus Christ, God's Son: full of the majesty of his person and work. He's God's eternal Son – and he's one with the Father. That's the force of the contrast made between God speaking *"by the prophets"* in the past and now speaking "*in Son*" – at least that would be the literal translation. The prophets were mere agents of God's communication – human instruments God used. But it's altogether different when it comes to God's Son, Jesus. The way it's worded, it's God himself, as the

Son, who's speaking. It's this wonderful person of God the Son that the text now focuses on. The very first thing we're told is that God has appointed him heir of all things.

Thinking of what we read in Romans chapter 8, you might say 'but what's so special, aren't we all sons of God, all heirs of God, through our faith in Christ?' And you'd be right, of course. We are – by the grace of God! But this can't compare with the only-begotten Son. He's the only one of his kind. He, as God's eternal Son, is God's sole heir by right – not by grace as in our case, but by right. And he's the one through whom God made the worlds. This brings us on to our second point of splendor, and it agrees with what we find in Colossians 1:16: *"For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him."*

All things have been created 'by', 'through' and 'for' Jesus Christ, the Son of God. His is the glory of the Creator, the glory of God, because the builder and Maker of all things is God himself. God's Son is the eternal Word who has made everything which has been made (John 1). When Hebrews tells us he's the one through whom God made the 'worlds', it's not directly referring to the natural physical world or universe around us. It would be better to translate that he's the one through whom God made the 'ages'. It seems the Bible's giving us the insight that God's creative work extended to successive periods of time each marked by specific characteristics and planned events. This age of grace we are living in is one of this series of ages designed by God.

And all brought into being by the one who's the brightness of his glory. The reference to Jesus is *"who being the brightness of His glory".* 'Who being' captures for us his timeless and absolute existence – much as in the same way as his *"I Am"* titles found in John's Gospel. He belongs outside of time, outside of the 'ages' he created to govern our lives. Eternally, he – the Son of God – is the brightness from, or the shining forth which is from God. It's the idea of radiance coming from God. As the radiation emitted from an atom determines which element it is, so there can be no doubting when we see his glory, that it's the glory of the only begotten of the Father (John 1). If that third point of splendor – the brightness of his glory – had a connection with the outward expression of his divine nature; then the fourth point of splendor is all about the inner divine nature itself. We're told that Jesus is the 'express image' of the Father.

The word 'image' was quite a colorful one: in those New Testament days it was used to describe the impression a die or stamp might make in soft wax or on a coin. The idea was of two things being individually or personally distinct, but yet completely equivalent. We still sometimes use a hand stamp. Once it's inked, it can be used to print an address box on a leaflet for distribution. Anyone who's ever done this quickly realizes that any mark on the stamp is faithfully reproduced on the paper. That's the idea here. There's nothing in the Father that's not in the Son – and vice versa, as to their essential nature or character. What this fourth point is telling us is the clear message that God's Son, Jesus, bears all the characteristic marks of deity.

Not only does he bear all the distinguishing hallmarks of deity, but – as the fifth point of splendor – we learn he bears, or up-

holds, *"all things by the word of his power"*. When Moses, back in the Bible book of Numbers chapter 11, complained to God that he couldn't bear all the people alone, it was the equivalent word to the one used of Jesus Christ. Definitely, a greater than Moses is here! Not only does he bear his people up, he bears the government of the whole universe on his shoulders! More than being Creator, he sustains and preserves the whole order of things – in him all things hold together (Colossians 1). But one day, Jesus of Nazareth will relax his grasp on every atom in this universe, and the elements will dissolve in fervent heat, as the apostle Peter reveals in his second Bible letter (2 Peter 3).

Without doubt, the sixth point is the most wonderful of all these revelations of the character of our Lord. It tells us that he who **bears** all the distinguishing marks of deity; he who **bears** all things on His almighty shoulders, once **bore** our sins in his body on the tree of Calvary! *"He ... by Himself purged our sins". Not all versions include the wording 'by Himself'*, but that's the full and true meaning of the expression. If we went back to a shop with a problem over some purchase, we'd be flattered if the Managing Director of the Company came to resolve our difficulty in person, wouldn't we? Now, let's try to grasp what the Bible letter to the Hebrews is saying. It's that the great Creator became our Savior, and bled and died for us on the cross to purge the sins of whoever believes on him. God the Son, himself, personally, attended to the problem of our sins! Amazing grace!

And finally, we're told he's now seated in heaven. He died for our sins and rose the third day (1 Corinthians 15:1-3). Four times the letter to the Hebrews emphasizes he's seated with God on high (1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2) where he's now become the High

Priest on behalf of all God's people. There's one high priest in the Old Testament of the Bible about whom we read that he sat down. I'm thinking of Eli. He sat down without first dealing with sin in his own household – and it was a disaster for the people of God then. We praise God that Jesus first dealt with all our sin before ever he sat down.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE JESUS OF THE REVELATION

At the close of the first century, John the aged apostle had, not a dream, but a vision from God. That vision was really an unveiling of Jesus Christ. For, the Bible word 'revelation' – as the last Bible book is called – basically means an unveiling. As we see from the opening chapter of the book of Revelation, it is not so much an unveiling of the future as it is an unveiling of Jesus Christ. Of course, the visions of the book of Revelation were indeed visions of the future, but we can view the whole book as an unveiling of the glory of Jesus Christ as he stands related to the eternal purposes of God. These purposes are shown to come to a magnificent and appropriate climax at the end of this last book of the Bible. This is how John describes his first vision, a vision of the glorified person of Jesus Christ:

> *"I saw ... One like the Son of Man clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last, I*

> *am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death"* (Revelation 1:9-19).

It's a vision that's filled with Jesus – with the glory of his person, the glory of his passion, and the glory of his power. First, let's think a little about the glory of his person. The Lord Jesus Christ, appearing to the apostle John, introduced himself as: *"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last."* What stirring words! Nothing less than an impression of the glory of the Creator, our Maker. He's the same one John described in the introduction to his gospel in 1:1-14:

> *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men ... He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."*

How well these words by the same human author sketch for us something of the glory of the person of Jesus Christ! The glory of his eternity – he was in the beginning. The glory of his personal-

ity – he was with God – in complete fellowship with God. Then there's the glory of his deity – he was and is God, the almighty. As such, as we've read, there's the glory of his creating – without him nothing has been made. Then there's the glory of his animating – in him was life. And the glory of his illuminating – for the life was the light of men. And then, finally, the supreme glory of the incarnation – for he came to live among us, among his own creatures in this world he himself had made.

But what was revealed to the apostle John in that first recorded vision in the book of Revelation extended to an unveiling of the glory of – not only his person – but also of his passion too. For Christ went on to say: *"I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore*." He's revealed as the one who not only came to live here on earth, but who chose to die and was then raised from the dead by the power of God.

John had met him one day about sixty years before he got this vision, and at that time John responded to his call to follow Him. In those days the Lord's glory was veiled as he travelled the country teaching and healing. It's true; for the most part his divine glory was veiled: what many people saw was a man whose identity was hidden from them. 'Isn't this the carpenter's son?' was their typical response. Had they known it, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, the rulers of this world then would never have crucified the Lord of glory. But crucified he was, because that was God's purpose in sending his Son into the world: it was his mission. He died the just for the unjust to bring us to God, the disciple Peter wrote in his first Bible letter. Oh, if you've never yet glimpsed this glory of his passion, can I ask you now to open your heart and ask the Lord to show you how he died for you - to

give you a future and a hope: even a new life! Having looked at the glory of his person, and the glory of his passion, we want to come now to the glory of his power. For the Christ of the vision said: *"I have the keys of Hades and of Death."* They keys of death and Hades, the underworld, symbolized at that time the greatest power known, the power of death. The greatest kings of history had all yielded to its power. But before John now stood one who had overcome that power.

At the end of the last century, the international News magazine TIME ran a feature on the twentieth 'century's greatest minds': brief word portraits of the hundred most influential people of the century, as judged by the editorial panel. Some choices were less controversial than others: choices like Einstein who left his imprint on the atom bomb, space travel and electronics. The last century alone saw the atom split, the psyche probed, genes spliced and sheep cloned. It invented plastic, radar and the silicon chip. It built airplanes, rockets, satellites, televisions, computers and atom bombs. It overthrew traditional ideas about learning, mathematics, economics and even the fabric of space and time itself. Yet for all *their* achievements, the life that has affected humanity more than any other is <u>not</u> found in TIME's write-up, nor does it belong to the last century at all. Nineteen centuries have come and gone since that life. Today it is Jesus Christ who remains the central figure of the human race, and the leader of mankind's progress. The vision John received unveils for us the true identity of the greatest mind to grace this planet.

Consider this description of him: 'He was someone who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village, where He worked in a carpenter's

shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was a wandering preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a house. He did not go to college. He never visited a big city (at least not by today's standards). He never travelled more than two hundred miles from the place where He was born. He did none of the things one usually associates with greatness. He had no credentials but Himself. He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against Him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to His enemies, and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. When He was dying His executioners gambled for His clothing, the only property He had on earth. When He was dead He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.' Yet, it has been said that 'all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected life on this planet so much as His one solitary life.'

The life of Jesus Christ was so powerful that it reset our clocks – in the sense that we now calculate the date from the time of his birth. But most important of all, he's the one who has the power to forgive. He's the only one who "has power on earth to forgive sins" (Mark 2:10). Nothing in this life is more wonderful than knowing that he's personally promised you that *"your sins are forgiven"* (Mark 2:5). The revelation John received was an unveiling of Jesus Christ in all his majesty as the Son of God, the one who stands at the center of all God's eternal purpose. If we find it hard to believe that his could be the most influential life this earth has ever known, then we've not sufficiently glimpsed the glory of Jesus.

CHAPTER TWELVE: JESUS RESURRECTED

One preacher visiting a school assembly to talk about God invited some questions afterwards. One lad near the back of the hall smirked as he asked: 'You ever seen God, mister?' The speaker paused for a moment, then said: 'No, but if I'd been around 2,000 years ago, I could have done!' For Jesus Christ did claim to be God.

You might object and say "but Jesus never actually said the exact words: 'I am God'." That's true, but imagine that you're driving one day and your car breaks down. You call George's Garage. Half an hour later a breakdown truck pulls up in front of you with 'George's Garage' written over the cab. The mechanic's overalls and the bill you have to sign both have the same words on them. Very soon the car is fixed, but when you arrive home someone says to you 'but did you check by asking the man if he was from George's Garage'? Well, no you hadn't, but everything about the man – in the circumstances – totally convinced you. That's like the way in which Jesus effectively claimed to be God. What he did, and everything about him speaks for itself. Born a Jew, Jesus endorsed fully the commandment: *"You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve"* (Luke 4:8). But, yet, at times, for example after healing the blind man in John chapter 9, Jesus allowed people to worship him (v.38). Put these two facts together and what else can you make of them, but that Jesus was, in fact, claiming to be God?

On another occasion Jesus caused quite a stir by publicly saying to someone: *"Your sins are forgiven you"* (Mark 2:9). The Jewish religious authorities who were within earshot were shocked and argued; *"Who can forgive sins but God alone?"* Now if someone sins against my neighbor, it's not appropriate for me to grant forgiveness for I'm not the offended party. But the Jews knew from their book of psalms (Psalm 51:4) that all sin is ultimately against God. To them, by claiming to forgive a man's past sins, Jesus was unmistakably claiming to be God.

After canvassing various opinions about himself which were held by the crowds, Jesus asked his followers: *"Who do you say that I am?"* That's the same central question of faith which we all have to face up to. It's difficult to come up with another answer than the one which declares him to be the Son of God, for then we'd have to choose between him being bad or mad. And the reason that these are the only other options is the fact that, alongside his wonderful miracles and teaching, he persistently claimed to be God's Son. If that claim wasn't true, he could only be a con-man or a madman – nothing else. Conmen generally deceive to escape trouble, and madmen are typically inconsistent – but Jesus' life, however, was the best.

Recently, I was walking along Princes Street in Edinburgh, the Scottish capital. I remember having read how years ago, on that very same Princes Street, a man had stopped to look at paintings in an art shop window. There was one of the cross of Jesus with the crowds watching and with Mary also watching. He hadn't thought about this subject for a while and was vaguely troubled by it. Next thing he knew was he became aware of a ragged street child beside him. 'That's Jesus there, sir, on the cross. He was a

good man. He died for us. There's his mother there, sir, looking at what they did to him.' The man felt a lump rising in his throat as the lad continued. 'And he died, sir, for our sins. And they buried him yonder, sir.' It was becoming too real for the man so he turned and walked away. He next felt a tugging at his coat tails. He turned to see the young boy who'd been giving him the uninvited commentary. Breathlessly the lad said: 'I forgot to tell you, sir, I forgot to tell you that he rose again.'

Without that sequel, without the astounding claim that Jesus Christ rose again from the dead three days after he was crucified, we could all simply walk away from the historical evidence for Jesus. But we can't really do that, if after having sifted through the evidence in an open, honest way, we come to conclude that it must be true that Jesus Christ rose again from the dead. The whole framework of Christianity stands or fails on this one event. I was interested to read the words of British journalist Mark Tully. He'd been revisiting the scene of Jesus' life to interview people for a BBC TV series on Jesus. He ended with his own view in which he said Jesus 'taught in strange riddles. He didn't convince his fellow Jews. And he didn't overthrow Rome. From that failure I have come to what, for me, is the most important conclusion of all. That the hardest ... article of Christian faith, the resurrection, must have happened. If there had been no miracle after Jesus' death, there would've been no grounds for faith ... no resurrection ... no church.'

But since you may still be wondering if it really can be true, let's try to imagine what the other possibilities are. Perhaps the first idea that occurs to you is that, hey, maybe Jesus never actually died in the first place. Could it be that in the cool of the tomb

he simply revived? Well, that'd mean that the execution crew of Roman soldiers that day, with the centurion in charge of them, somehow got it wrong. But they wouldn't have dared to leave anything to chance, not in this politically charged case. They were experienced professionals, they knew their job well, grim though it was. Although they didn't feel the need to break Jesus' legs – so sure were they that he was already well and truly dead – they did certify him dead by thrusting a spear into his side.

Next, Joseph of Arimathea took charge of the burial in typical Jewish fashion. After the body was washed, it was wrapped foot to head in linen grave clothes. Then, because it was the custom, what they did was to apply aloe and myrrh - a really sticky tree resin. In this way the grave-clothes were in a very real sense glued on the body. With the spices these grave-clothes weighed as much as a hundred pounds (John 19:39). And then, of course, there was the small matter of something like a two-ton stone rolled against the mouth of the rock-hewn tomb. The authorities then had it sealed and guarded with soldiers. With so many people that day wanting Jesus dead and buried, and with all the precautions that were taken, first to establish death, and then to secure the tomb itself, it's simply beyond belief that Jesus somehow revived and escaped. "Okay then," someone might say. "But isn't it possible that the followers of Jesus who reported the empty tomb on the third day, the women folk, actually went to the wrong tomb – after all, they were in a state of shock?" Think about it – how could anyone mistake the tomb of someone who was really important to them, especially when that tomb had been sealed and further identified by having an armed guard

posted at it?! In any case, they recognized the same grave-clothes lying just as they'd left them in the now empty tomb.

Suppose the body was stolen then. If the culprits were supposed to be Jesus' disciples, then they'd first have needed to overpower the guards. The authorities had taken effective measures against exactly this kind of thing being attempted. But even if you were to persist in thinking this might still have happened, what we'd then have to believe is that the disciples would later be martyred for something that they knew full well was a lie, a hoax. Someone might die for something false if they sincerely believe it to be true.

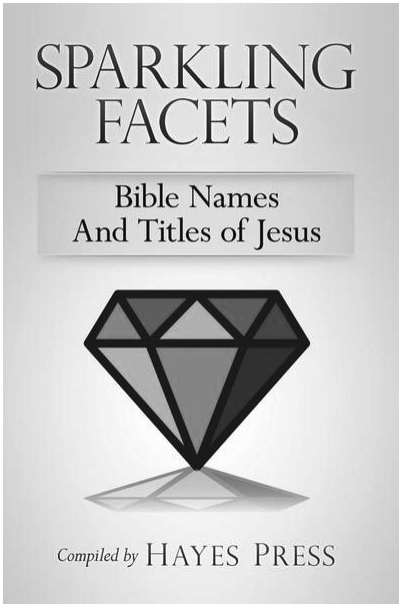
But that's not the situation here. What we're having to suppose in this theory is that the very people who fabricated the evidence gave their lives for their own made-up lie. And if either the Jews or the Romans had contrived the disappearance of the body of Jesus, they could've killed off this annoying new upstart religion at any time afterwards by simply producing the body and parading it down the main street of Jerusalem. But what conceivable motive would they have for stealing the body in the first place? There again, you might say it was all in the mind of these early disciples - mere wish-fulfillment: that those alleged appearances of Jesus in resurrection were just illusionary. After all, there are some weird stories around today that someone somewhere knows someone who thinks they saw dead pop-star Elvis Presley on some porch in Hawaii.

But that comparison doesn't fit the evidence either. The disciples don't seem to have had even the remotest thought of any such thing as resurrection, despite the fact Jesus had given them clues

earlier. After the shock of Jesus' being taken and crucified, they were in disarray and very depressed. Without any prospect of anything beyond, they went through with performing the full Jewish burial ritual. Yes, they really expected then that Jesus was going to stay dead. When the news of his resurrection broke and he began to appear to them, they were slow to leave their state of disbelief. Nor were Jesus' resurrection appearances fleeting isolated visions claimed only to have been seen by a few. No, within a few weeks hundreds of people had seen him alive. But do you know what the most significant thing of all for me is? It's the transformation that then took place in the lives of these previously demoralized followers. Within a few short weeks of Jesus' death, these same followers were out and about preaching for all they were worth that Jesus was truly alive. What could possibly have galvanized them into such bold action in what was still a very hostile environment – other than the fact the Jesus truly had risen again from the dead even as they were claiming?

Well, what do you make of it? Lawyers who are in the business of studying evidence for things which are alleged to have happened have studied the quality of the evidence for the resurrection and declare themselves satisfied with it. A Professor of Modern History says: 'I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair enquirer, than that Christ died and rose again from the dead.' It's certainly evidence which demands a verdict.

Did you love *Jesus: What Does the Bible Really Say?*? Then you should read *Sparkling Facets: Bible Names and Titles of Jesus* by Hayes Press!



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